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Robben Ford

The Ultimate Guitar Lesson

By Chad Johnson

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PLAY LIKE ROBBEN FORD

by Chad Johnson

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Robben Ford

The Ultimate Guitar Lesson

by Chad Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

You hold in your hands the ultimate guide to learning to play like Robben Ford. Hal Leonard's *Play Like...* series takes a closer look at the styles of guitar giants than any instructional guide before, dissecting every aspect of tone, technique, and magic that these players impart on the instrument. Robben holds a special place in the guitar community, commanding respect, awe, and admiration from players of all genres. His touch on the instrument is legendary, as is his sound and note choice. Equally at home in a down-home blues or a jazz fusion setting, his authority on the instrument is second to none.

The book is organized into several chapters, each focusing on different aspects of Robben's complete guitar picture. Here's a quick rundown of what to expect:

Tale of the Tone

It may very well all be in the fingers, but it's still nice to know what they actually played and when. This section will explore Robben's gear throughout his career—from his earlier days with L.A. Express, the Yellowjackets, and beyond to his continued success as a solo artist.

Songs

In this chapter, we'll take a look at transcriptions of five classic songs and examine Robben's guitar work closely on each one. Each song has an accompanying lesson and other helpful tidbits and is demonstrated on the audio with a full band track.

Essential Licks

This section is all about licks, licks, and more licks, all of which are in the style of Robben and help to illustrate concepts and techniques that he's relied upon throughout his career. Each lick is demonstrated on the audio.

Signature Rhythm Parts & Solos

Though celebrated mostly for his leads, Robben can lay down some killer rhythm as well. In this section, we'll check out some stellar examples of both, with excerpts from 10 songs—again, with accompanying lessons and audio.

Integral Techniques

In this section, we'll look at Robben's technique on the instrument and how it affects his tone, phrasing, and overall approach to the guitar. Each example will be demonstrated on the audio.

Stylistic DNA

Here, we'll look at those hard-to-pinpoint aspects of Robben's playing that help let us know it's him. Everyone has a different sonic fingerprint on the instrument, and this chapter will help illuminate why Robben sounds the way he does. Again, audio demonstrations accompany each example.

Must Hear

From his fusion days with the Yellowjackets and his short stint with Miles Davis to his sophisticated "uptown" blues of the late '80s and his rootsy blues with the Blue Line in the early '90s and beyond, Robben has left quite an impressive legacy of recorded work. We'll look at the absolute essentials here.

Must See

Robben's not only an incredible performer; he's also a celebrated instructor and clinician. In this section, we'll cover the essential videos from both categories. This section will include YouTube videos as well.

ABOUT THE AUDIO

For instant access to the audio examples that accompany this book, simply go to **www.halleonard.com/mylibrary** and enter the code found on page 1.

TALE OF THE TONE

Robben's tone is one of the most sought-after in the blues and rock guitar communities. Though his association with the magical Dumble amplifier is well-documented, he didn't always make use of such an unattainable music-maker. Here, we'll examine his tools of the trade throughout the years. As most players, including Robben, spend nearly their entire career purchasing, trading, and selling instruments, it's impractical (and quite likely impossible, even for Robben) to list every single guitar or amp he's ever used. Nevertheless, we'll certainly take a look at his most prevalent gear.

Early Days (1970–76)

This period of Robben's career encompasses his time with harmonica great Charlie Musselwhite, the Charles Ford Band (with his brothers Mark and Patrick), veteran bluesman Jimmy Witherspoon, and the L.A. Express, which backed both George Harrison and Joni Mitchell on tour, as well as on Mitchell's albums *Hissing of Summer Lawns* and *Miles of Aisles*.

Guitars

- **Guild Starfire III (early '70s):** This is what Robben calls his first "good" guitar. He mainly used it at home for practicing and playing, but it did make a few gig appearances in the early days.
- **Gibson L-5 (early '70s):** Robben bought this jazz axe for use with the Charles Ford Band. He also used it for a while with Jimmy Witherspoon before trading it in towards the Gibson Super 400.
- **Gibson Super 400 (late '60s):** Robben bought this previously owned guitar from a shop on Sunset Boulevard. He traded his L-5 and $200 for it and used it extensively during his time with 'Spoon.

Amps

- **Blackface Fender Bassman:** This was Robben's main amp with the Charles Ford Band and during the first part of his stint with Jimmy Witherspoon. He ran the amp through the matching companion 2x12 cabinet.
- **Fender Super Reverb:** Whereas the L-5 was paired mostly with the Bassman, Robben bought a Super Reverb shortly after acquiring his Super 400. He's made extensive use of Supers ever since (along with, of course, the Dumble).

Early Solo Career and the Yellowjackets

After leaving L.A. Express, Robben recorded his jazz-tinged debut solo album, *Schizophonic*, in 1976. The title comes from his splitting time between guitar and saxophone (his first instrument) on the album. The live *Discovering the Blues* followed in 1978, but it was his 1979 fusion outing, *The Inside Story*, that began to show his diversity as both a player and a composer. The band he assembled for that album would soon become the Yellowjackets.

Guitars

- **Gibson ES-335:** Once Robben joined the L.A. Express and began touring with Joni Mitchell, the Super 400 wouldn't really cut it, so he picked up an ES-335 on the advice of Larry Carlton. This is the guitar that's featured on the cover of *The Inside Story*.
- **Yamaha SA2000:** This was basically a high-end copy of a Gibson ES-335, which Robben used for some tracks on the first Yellowjackets album.
- **Fender Stratocaster:** According to interviews, Robben may have begun using Strats for various rhythm parts in the studio at this time, but no specific instruments could be confirmed.

Amps

- **Mesa Boogie Mark I:** This amp was used extensively on *The Inside Story* and in live shows during the time. This is yet another parallel between Robben and Larry Carlton.
- **Fender Super Reverb:** Robben continued to put this amp into the rotation as well, particularly while on the road.
- **Yamaha G100:** This was a solid-state Fender Twin-style amp that featured a 2x12 cabinet. Robben used this amp a great deal on the first Yellowjackets album, which resulted in a cleaner sound than heard on *The Inside Story*.

Stint with Miles Davis, "Talk to Your Daughter" and the Blue Line

In the mid-'80s, Robben got the call from Miles to join his touring band. He also played a bit with David Sanborn around this time. In 1985, Robben recorded a demo in five days, hoping to secure a new record deal. The result of those sessions, which was released in 1988 as the *Talk to Your Daughter* album, became another career breakthrough for Robben, exposing him to a much larger audience. It reached #120 on the *Billboard 200*, which, for a blues album, is nothing to sneeze at. He followed *Talk to Your Daughter* with a string of successful albums with the Blue Line, which consisted of Roscoe Beck on bass and Tom Brechtlein on drums.

Guitars

- **Fender Stratocaster (1958 Tobacco Burst):** This was Robben's main guitar while playing with Miles Davis. He installed a mini-humbucker in it to better simulate the Gibson lead tone.
- **Gibson ES-335:** This is the same one he used for *The Inside Story*, and it continued to make occasional live appearances.
- **Fender Esprit Ultra (prototype):** This was a guitar designed by Fender's Dan Smith in collaboration with Robben. It was Fender's attempt to break into the humbucking market that was mostly cornered by Gibson. Robben's model was made in Japan, and he made extensive use of it on the *Talk to Your Daughter* album and many years afterward. It was this guitar that eventually became the Fender Robben Ford Signature model.
- **Fender Telecaster (1960 Blonde):** Robben found this Tele in San Francisco and began to use it on the Blue Line's *Mystic Mile*. After that, it became one of his main blues axes.

Amps

- **Dumble Overdrive Special (#102):** This is Robben's "holy grail tone" amplifier that has turned many guitar players on their ear throughout the years. Robben purchased this amp in 1983 and used it while playing with Miles and all over the *Talk to Your Daughter* album. He ran it through a Dumble cabinet loaded with EV speakers, although he would occasionally use Marshall cabinets loaded with Celestions as well.
- **Fender Twin Reverb:** Robben often used Twins, in conjunction with the Dumble, on the road for a bigger sound.

Effects

- **TC Electronic 2290 Delay:** This rack unit became part of Robben's tone in the early '90s, using it for delay and chorus at times.
- **Lexicon PCM 70 Digital Reverb:** This is another high-end, rack-mounted effect.
- **Ernie Ball Volume Pedal:** Robben makes use of the occasional volume swell with this pedal.
- **Dunlop Crybaby Wah:** Robben preferred the Crybaby to the Vox wah, which was (re)gaining popularity at the time.

Later Solo Career (late '90s to present)

During his time with the Blue Line, Robben began to slowly return to a more typical blues sound, eschewing the effects for more traditional tones. At this point, we'll only mention instruments and amps that haven't been mentioned yet, as he still made use of his Dumble, Fender Esprit, and blonde Tele.

Guitars

- **Gibson Les Paul (1955):** Robben acquired this guitar before the *Tiger Walk* album, and it made several appearances on it.
- **Gibson Les Paul (1957 Goldtop):** This guitar is on "permanent loan" from Larry Carlton, as Robben puts it, and he's made extensive use of it since Larry loaned it to him.
- **Sakashta Custom-Made Noupaul:** This Les Paul-style guitar (with a few more bells and whistles) was made for Robben by Taku Sakashta in the mid-2000s, and Robben has used it quite often since.
- **Gene Baker B1C Robben Ford Signature (mid '90s):** This is a double-cutaway, humbucker-equipped guitar that, from a physical perspective, is similar to his Fender Esprit signature model.
- **Epiphone Riviera (1966):** This is the only guitar used on *Bringing It Back Home* (2013), and Robben has since made extensive use of it in clinics (such as the TrueFire Blues Revolution series) and in live settings.

Amps

- **Fender Super Reverb:** When not using his Dumble, Robben can usually be found running through a Super.

Effects

- **Vox wah**
- **Hermida Zendrive Boost:** This is what Robben uses for overdrive when running through the Super Reverbs.

SONGS

In this chapter, we're going to look at five complete song transcriptions, arranged in chronological order*, with a lesson on each. We'll study them in-depth and get specific with any and all techniques needed to play them. By the end of each lesson, you should know everything you need to play the song. With regard to the song choices, several different eras are covered, though it's not possible to represent the variety of Robben's career with only five selections. Suffice it to say that the majority of his formidable guitar legacy is represented in one way or another here.

Tee Time for Eric

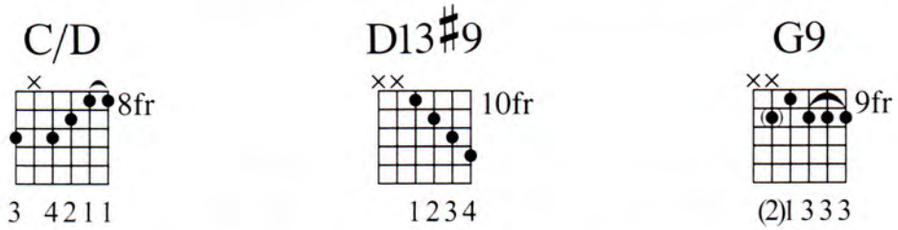
from *The Inside Story*, 1979

This funky fusion tune closes out *The Inside Story*, and it does so with style. Chock full of slash chords, extensions, and altered dominants, it's a great vehicle for Robben's angular, bop-laden phrases—and he certainly drops a jaw or two along the way. This tune definitely stated to thousands of new listeners that there was a new kid in town, and his name was Robben Ford.

The rhythm section for this track (and album in general) is cooking and consisted of Ricky Lawson on drums, Jimmy Haslip on bass, and Russell Ferrante on keys, which is the band that essentially became the Yellowjackets with their self-titled release in 1981. Robben sports the ES-335 tone here, blowing through a Mesa Boogie Mark I amplifier. Let's work through it section by section. For reference, the song transcription begins on page 14.

Section A – Intro

The tune kicks off with Robben and drummer Ricky Lawson serving up some serious funk. Most likely using his Strat, Robben outlines the groove with triads, altered voicings, and a healthy dose of muted scratch rhythm as well. Though there's a considerable amount of sliding going on, three main chord voicings being used are:



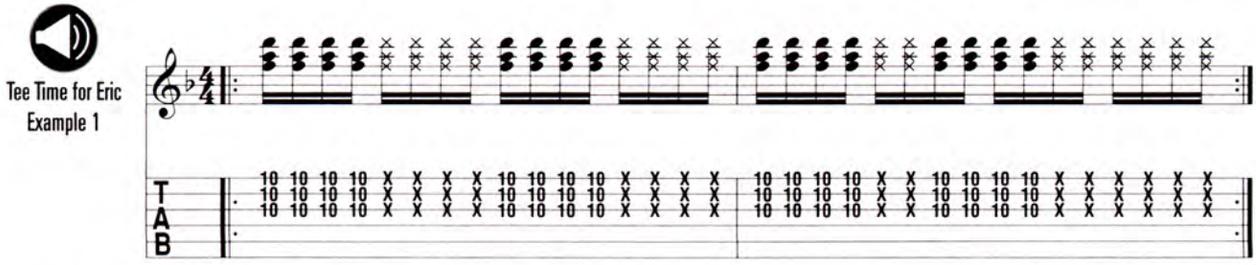
(**Note:** The D13♯9/F♯ chord symbol in the song refers to the fact that the bass is playing F♯.)

For the C/D and G9 chords, Robben's sliding into them from a half step (one fret) below, which is a very common decoration in funk styles. You'll need to employ some fret-hand muting for the C/D chord in order to keep the fifth string from ringing out. This can be achieved by allowing the pad of your third finger or the tip of your fourth finger (or both) to touch the fifth string (see photo A).

*Though the *Blues Connotation* album was released in 1996, "Billie's Bounce" was actually recorded years before that (for a Jerry Granelli album), which is why it appears before "The Brother."

For the "X" notes, you'll need to release pressure with your fret hand so that the strings won't ring out anymore and you get a dead-sounding, percussive "click." Your fret hand should still be hovering around the same chord shape so that you can easily reapply pressure when you need to sound the chord again. Don't get too hung up on trying to pick out exactly the same "X" strings as notated here, as that would be counterproductive. The idea is simply to alternate fretting the chord when necessary and releasing the pressure when not while maintaining the 16th-note strums.

Here's an exercise to work on this idea. Pay careful attention to the rhythms and keep your pick hand moving in steady 16th notes. Your pick-hand wrist should be loose so you can really whack certain notes in order to accent them. Try to watch videos of Robben playing in a funky rhythm style to see how he does this.

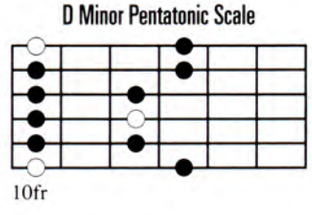


Notice that Robben slides the top portion of the G9 voicing—the F, A, and D notes on strings 3–1—up a whole step, to G–B–E. This is another common trick with that voicing. Even though those three notes (G, B, and E) technically form a G6 (or Em) chord, the combined effect when alternated with the ninth-chord portion (F, A, and D) sort of implies a G13 sound.

At measure 5, pianist Russell Ferrante joins Robben and Ricky, and the band really starts cooking. Notice how Robben adds a variation over the G9 chord in measure 6 by moving up to a higher inversion of the triad voicings on strings 3–1. The F–D–A voicing becomes A–D–F on beat 4 and slides up to B–E–G. These are the exact same three-note combinations, only the notes are reorganized so they can be played higher up the neck. This is a testament of Robben's extensive chord vocabulary. Here are those two chord fragments:

Section B – Main Theme

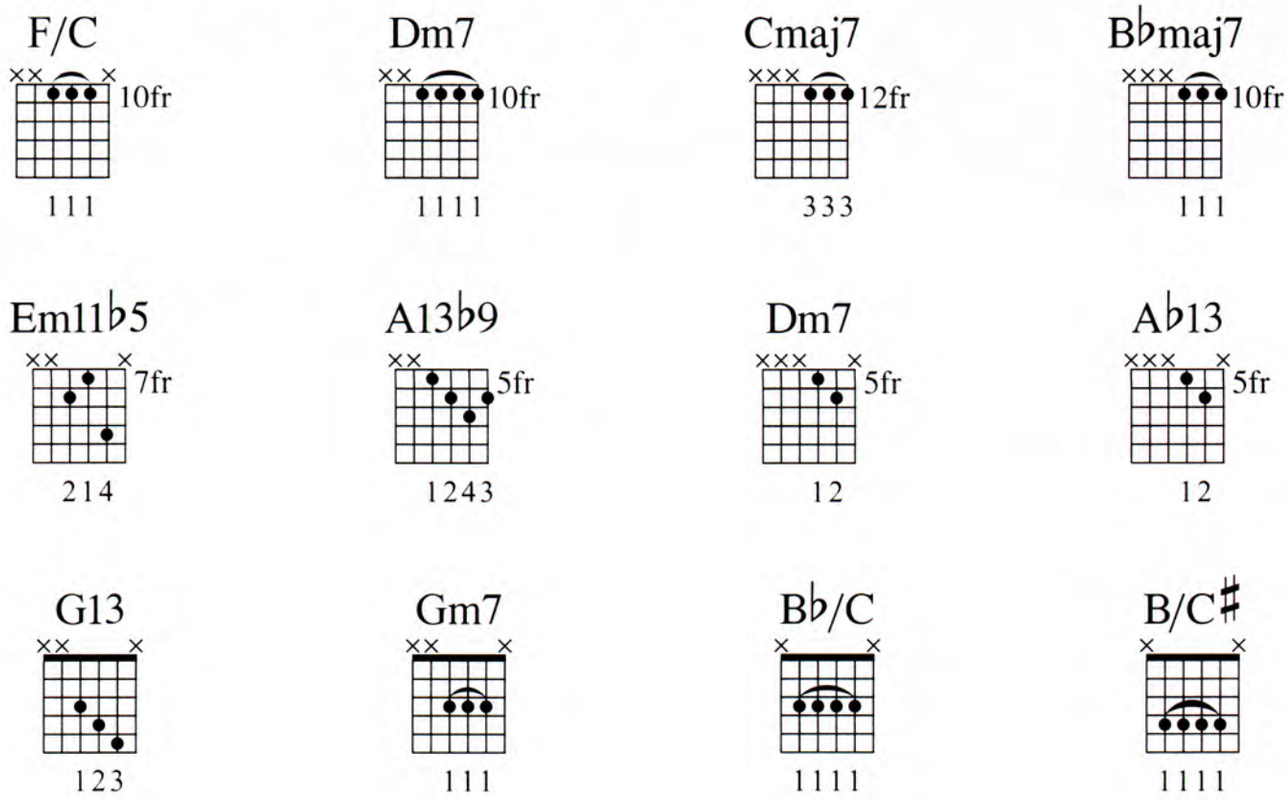
At measure 9, the rhythm part from the intro continues and serves as the harmonic backdrop for the main theme, where Robben enters, via overdub, with his ES-335 lead tone. The "head" is fairly simple; it's constructed from only a few notes of the D minor pentatonic scale: C, D, and F. Here's the common scale form from which he's working:



Robben plays it very straight here, emphasizing rhythmic precision and refraining from any vibrato, slides, or other expressive devices. Notice the staccato marking on the F note each time. This subtle detail really gives the melody extra punch, so don't neglect it!

Section C – Secondary Theme

We reach a secondary theme at measure 17, and the new chord progression begins to tonicize D minor a bit more with a six-bar phrase. As Gtr. 1, Robben continues to peck out a funky rhythm track, mixing D octaves (for G7, G♯°7, and G/A in measure 17) with two-, three-, and four-note voicings to handle the changes. Robben's hitting all the ensemble accents here and occasionally adding muted 16th-note strums in between, similar to the intro. Here's a look at the voicings that he employs for the chords, beginning in measure 18.



Take special note of the economy of motion employed here. Robben makes use of voicings that don't require him to make awkward leaps from one chord to the next, resulting in a phrase that plays well and sounds smooth. Note also the clever B♭/C–B/C♯ walk-up at the end of the phrase, in measure 22, which continues up one more half step (to C/D) for the repeat of the main theme (measure 9).

The melody here begins with more phrases from D minor pentatonic, and Robben makes brief use of the extension box by sliding up a whole step, from G to A, on string 3 with the third finger. In measure 19, Robben varies the melody slightly by accessing the blues note (A♭) via a ring-finger slide. In measure 20, the same rhythm is used as heard in measure 18, but the notes are derived from the D natural minor scale to coincide with the different chords (Em11♭5 and A13♭9). Slide from G to A with your ring finger, play C on string 2 with your middle, and then move down to 10th position, with your middle finger on B♭, remaining there to finish the measure.

Notice that Robben overdubs Gtr. 3 here to double Gtr. 2 in unison, with the only exception being measure 21, where Gtr. 3 harmonizes a 3rd below Gtr. 2's bend to A by remaining on F. In measure 22, the half-step descending grace-note slide from A♭ to G is a classic Robben-ism that we'll see time and time again. Here's a little exercise to get the feel of this move. Pay attention to the rhythms and listen to the audio to make sure that you're getting it right.

Section D – Bridge

The bridge arrives at measure 24, after two statements of the main and secondary themes. This is largely a chordal section, and Robben settles into a nice riff built on sliding 6th intervals relative to each chord in the progression. He doubles Gtr. 1 with Gtr. 4 here for a thick sound, and the two play nearly identical parts through measure 29. For these 6ths, you'll need to employ fret-hand muting again, similarly to the C/D chord from the intro. Try using your ring and pinky fingers to play the shapes, allowing the pad of the ring and/or tip of the pinky to deaden the string in between. Ideally, the tip of the ring finger should deaden the string above it, as well, as this will make the job of strumming much easier because you won't need to be quite as precise. In fact, since you're not using your index or middle fingers at all, you can lay one of them down lightly across all the strings as an extra precaution (see photo B).

On beat 3 of measure 29, use your ring and middle fingers for the 6th interval, followed by your ring, pinky, and middle fingers for the C–F–A♭ triad on strings 4–2.

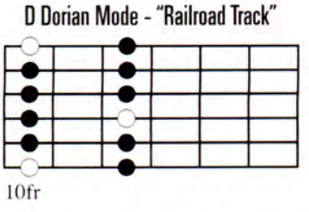
Section E – Interlude

This section is basically a repeat of the intro, but Robben changes up the order of the variations on the G9 chord a bit. This section serves as the calm before the storm—that is, Robben's guitar solo.

Section F – Guitar Solo

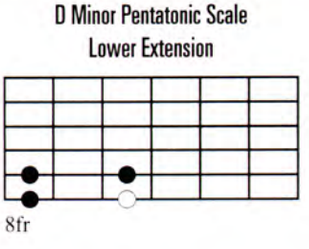
Robben is given quite a long leash for the solo, stretching out over nearly two full repeats of the entire form: sections B, C, and D. By and large, the majority of his phrases are derived from the D blues scale, but he certainly slips in plenty of other melodic goodies. Let's take a look at some of the highlights.

Measures 37–41: To open the solo, Robben makes clever use of a Dorian scale fragment, which is sometimes referred to as the "railroad track." Here's what it looks like:



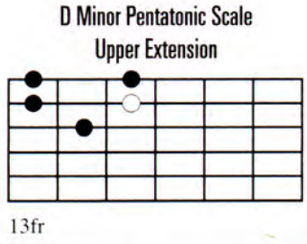
You'll notice that, even though it contains only two notes per string, every note of the D Dorian mode (D–E–F–G–A–B–C) is present in one octave or another. He begins with a syncopated half-step bending lick on string 1 that he transposes, note-for-note, down a string. Notice that, by bending half steps, he's targeting key notes (F on string 1 and C on string 2) of the D Dorian mode.

He continues working down through this scale form until he wraps up the phrase in measures 42–43 with inclusion of the blue note (A♭) and descent to the minor pentatonic lower extension box in eighth position, shown here:



You should handle this whole opening section with your index and ring fingers exclusively, save for the A♭ on string 5, which is played by your middle finger.

Measures 48–52: This section is a great lesson in moving between the pentatonic box position and the upper extension box, which is located here:



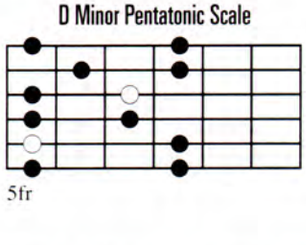
To get a feel for this, try the following exercise. Pay strict attention to the fret-hand fingering, as it's the key for smoothly transitioning between the two forms.

Robben closes out this first part of his solo with a chromatic lick over the G9 chord (measure 52). It's important to notice the two, key 6th intervals that frame this lick:

The notes of the first, G and B, combined with those of the second, F and A, perfectly outline the G9 tonality. The rest of the lick is just derived from sliding chromatically between the two.

Section G – Guitar Solo (continued)

Measures 53–54: In measure 53, Robben continues with bluesy pentatonic phrasing over the chords from section C, but he does so in a different position. This full D minor pentatonic form looks like this:



In measure 54, there's some tricky position-shifting going on, so take it like this: use the ring finger for fret 8, string 1, pulling off to the index finger at fret 6, and then shift up to eighth position, with your index on fret 8 to finish out the measure.

Measures 57–58: If you don't plan ahead, the descending lick in measure 57 can trip you up. Begin in 13th position for the first three notes. For the A note on fret 14, string 3, shift to your ring finger and pull off chromatically to your index finger (fret 12). Then, quickly shift your index finger down to fret 10.

For the final phrase of the section (measure 58), begin each beat with a ring-finger slide. For beats 2 and 3, continue with your middle and index on strings 2 and 1, respectively. For beat 4 though, continue with your pinky on string 2, fret 16, and your middle on string 1, fret 15, resolving to your index (fret 13) for the downbeat of measure 59.

Section H – Guitar Solo (continued)

Measures 59–67: This part of the solo takes place over the chords from section D, which wander through several keys ambiguously, and Robben whips out some doozies. After playing it cool in measures 59–60 by just targeting a few key tones for the F dominant tonality, he launches into a 16th-note, arpeggio-laden phrase over D13sus4—a lick that's laced with a bit of chromaticism for a bop-like sound. Measure 61 can be handled entirely in 12th position, as can the first two notes (G and E) in measure 62. For the F♯ on string 3 ("and" of beat 1), shift to 11th position, shifting down yet again to ninth position for the C note on string 4 (beat 2). Remain there through the rest of the measure, reaching back one fret for resolution of the phrase on the B♭ note (measure 63).

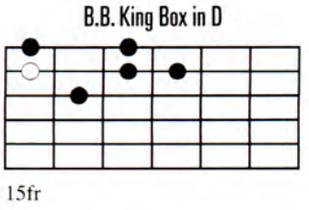
The phrase in measures 63–64, though quite tricky, can be handled entirely in 10th position with a one-finger-per-fret strategy. Work it up slowly and you should be fine. On beat 1 of measure 64, you'll need to roll your middle finger from fret 11, string 3 to fret 11, string 2, and then you'll have the reverse on beat 3. To get a feel for this move, practice the following exercise. Remember: you don't want these two notes to ring together. This maneuver requires a bit of pre-planning, especially in the case of the latter, where you're moving from a higher-pitched string to a lower one.

Tee Time for Eric
Example 4

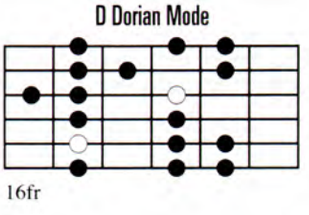
In preparation for the return to the section-B chords (section I), Robben rounds out measures 65–66 with some more bluesy pentatonic phrases.

Section I – Guitar Solo (continued)

Measures 67–69: Again, over the chords from the intro and main theme, Robben returns to D Dorian phrasing. Here though, he's working out of the "B.B. King box" in 15th position, which looks like this:



Measure 70: Robben rips off a descending 16th-note lick here that's largely D Dorian, but it includes one well-placed, key chromatic passing tone, which colors the whole lick. The whole scale form at work here looks like this:



The first half of the measure is easily handled in 17th position if you begin with a pinky slide from fret 19 to fret 20 (string 1). On beat 3, shift down with your index to grab fret 16, string 3, and then fret 14.

Measures 73–74: After another nice lick connecting the upper extended blues box with the home-base D minor pentatonic box, Robben launches into a syncopated organ-inspired lick to close out the section. To play this one, use hybrid picking, with the pick assigned to string 3 and your middle or ring finger assigned to string 1. Barre your index finger across fret 10 of strings 3–1 and use either a middle/ring or ring/pinky combination for the hammer/pull-off moves on frets 12 and 13. The rhythm is tricky, too, as the move encompasses three 16th notes and then repeats, creating a *hemiola*.

Section J – Guitar Solo (continued)

Measures 75–80: Robben bleeds the organ lick from measure 74 over into this section, which takes place over the section-C chords. More D blues licks, from the main box and extended box, follow in measures 76–77, and he works in a bit of D natural minor in measures 78–79.

C

For the final measure of the section (measure 80), he begins by running up a Gm arpeggio in 18th position and proceeds to rock it out a bit with a Lynyrd Skynyrd-approved oblique-bending lick on strings 2 and 1. Bend fret 20, string 2 with your ring finger and, while holding that, play fret 20, string 1 with your pinky (see photo C). Pick the pre-bent string 2 again and release the bend, continuing with a pull-off to your index finger (fret 18).

Section K – Piano Solo

Robben's solo bleeds over into section K, which, technically, marks the beginning of the keyboard solo, but it also functions as a transitional bridge between the two as Robben slowly winds down with a few long, sustained notes that target chord tones of the underlying harmony. By measure 89, Robben's lead is completely out, and he backs up the keyboard solo as Gtr. 1 with very sparse comping mostly consisting of dyads.

Section L – Piano Solo (continued)

Though the piano is still soloing at the beginning of this section, it functions as another bridge, and Robben recalls his sliding-6ths riffs from section D. He also fills in the gaps here with lots of muted notes and dyad accents, similar to the intro.

Coda

After a restatement of the intro and main theme, Robben rides out the fade in the Coda, which takes place over the intro progression, by stating the main theme and filling in the gaps with answering licks. His phrasing here is entirely derived from the D blues scale, with the one exception being a nod to the Dorian mode in measure 114 with the single B note.

Tee Time for Eric
Full Song

TEE TIME FOR ERIC

By Robben Ford

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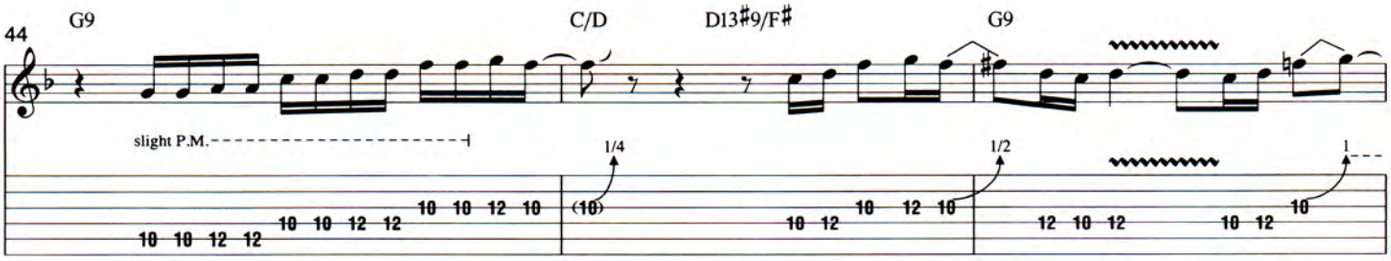
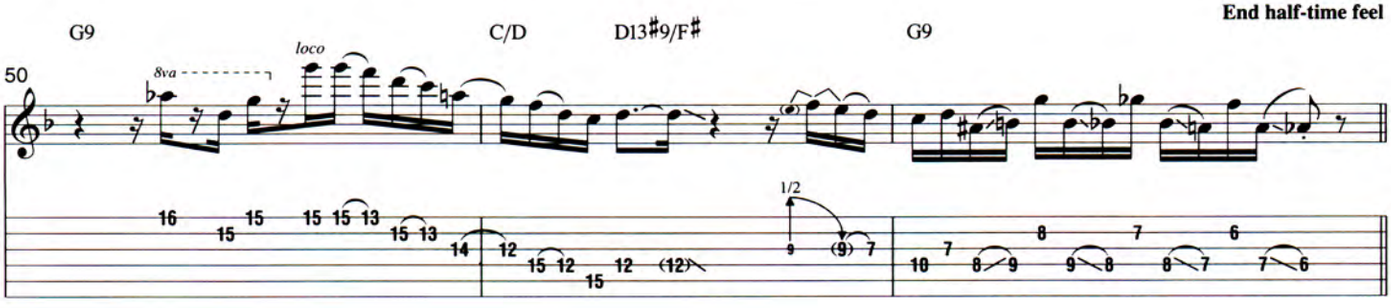
To Coda
* End half-time feel
C/D D13♯9/F♯ G9 C/D D13♯9/F♯ G9
13
End Riff A
*1st & 2nd time only
C
17
G7 G♯o7 G/A F/C C♯o7 Dm7 Cmaj7 B♭maj7
Gtrs. 2 & 3
Rhy. Fig. 2
Gtr. 1
Em11♭5 A13♭9 Dm7 A♭13/G♭ G13 Gm7 B♭/C B/C♯
20
1.
8va
loco
Gtr. 2
Gtr. 3
1/4
Gtr. 1
End Rhy. Fig. 2
Rhy. Fill 1
End Rhy. Fill 1

2.
D
23
Gtrs. 2 & 3
Gm7
B♭/C
C/D
F13sus4
Gtrs. 2 & 3 tacet
*Gtr. 4 (clean)
Rhy. Fig. 3
*Doubled throughout
Gtr. 1
Rhy. Fill 2
End Rhy. Fill 2
26
D13sus4
Gtr. 4
B♭/A♭
Gtr. 1
Gtr. 4 tacet
29
G7
G♯o7
G/A
B♭/C
B/C♯
End Rhy. Fig. 3

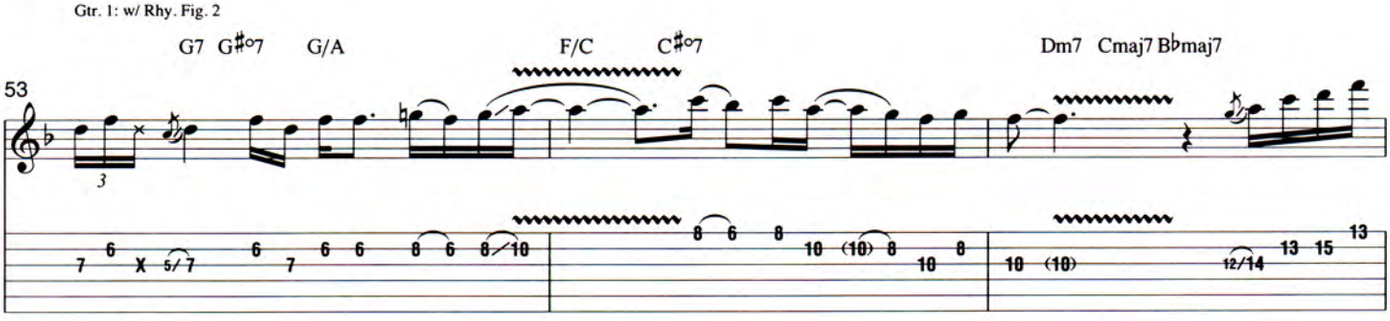
E
Half-time feel
32
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
G9
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
Gtr. 1
1.
2.
F
Gtr. 1: w/ Rhy. Fig. 1 (2 times)
35
G9
G9
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
Gtr. 5 (dist.)
w/ chorus
1/2
Gtr. 1
38
G9
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
G9
Gtr. 5
41
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
G9
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
string noise

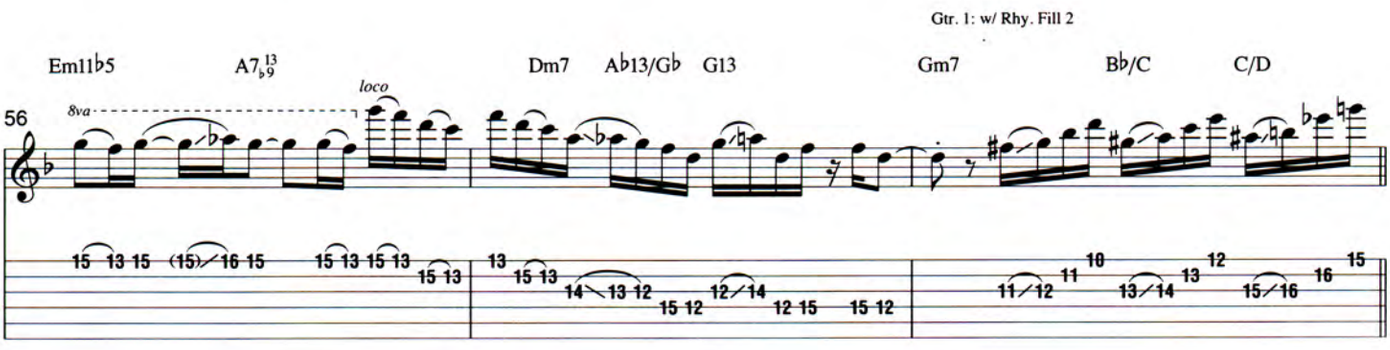

44
G9
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
G9
slight P.M.
1/4
1/2
1

47
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
G9
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
1/2
1

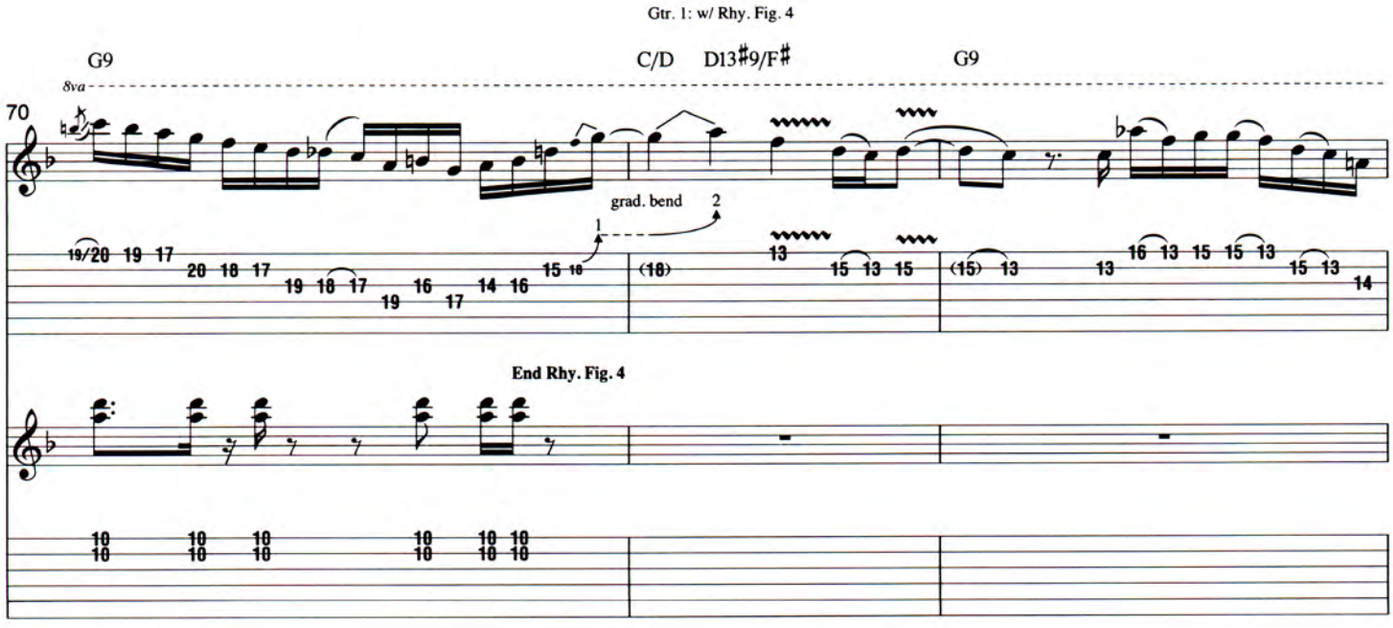

End half-time feel
50
G9
8va
loco
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
G9
1/2

G

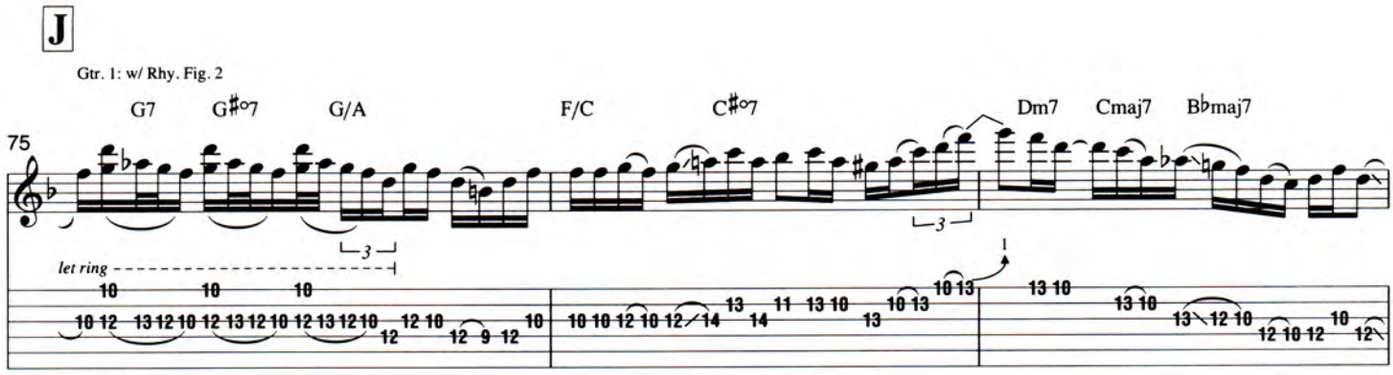

Gtr. 1: w/ Rhy. Fig. 2
53
G7
G♯o7
G/A
F/C
C♯o7
Dm7
Cmaj7
B♭maj7

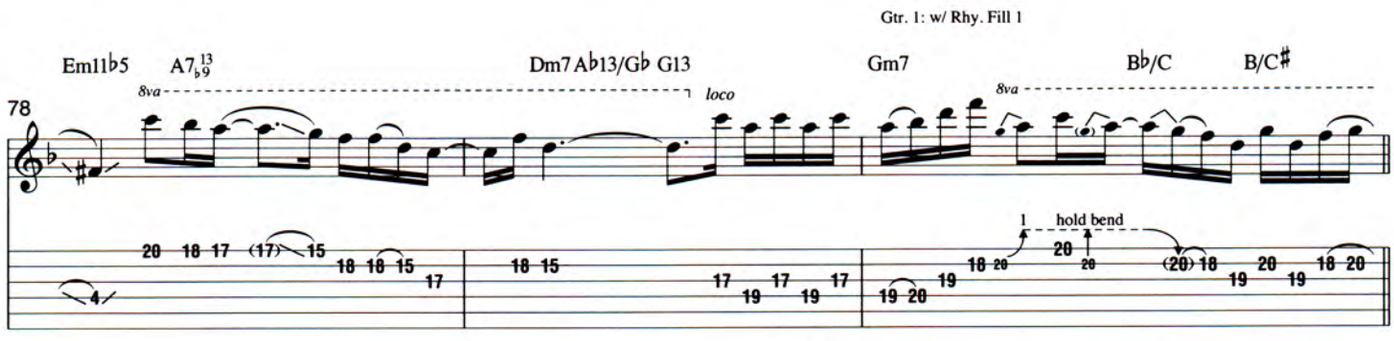

Gtr. 1: w/ Rhy. Fill 2
56
Em11b5
A7♭9♭13
8va
loco
Dm7
A♭13/G♭
G13
Gm7
B♭/C
C/D

H
Gtr. 1 tacet
F13sus4
D13sus4
59
Gtr. 5
8va
loco
Gtr. 1
63
B♭/A♭
G7 G♯°7
G/A
B♭/C
B/C♯
Gtr. 5
P.M.
I
Half-time feel
67
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
G9
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
Gtr. 5
1/4
Rhy. Fig. 4
Gtr. 1


Gtr. 1: w/ Rhy. Fig. 4
G9
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
G9
8va
70
grad. bend
End Rhy. Fig. 4

End half-time feel
73
C/D
D13♯9/F♯
G9
Gtr. 5
8va
loco
w/ pick and fingers
let ring


J
Gtr. 1: w/ Rhy. Fig. 2
G7
G♯o7
G/A
F/C
C♯o7
Dm7
Cmaj7
B♭maj7
75
let ring


Gtr. 1: w/ Rhy. Fill 1
Em11♭5
A7♭9 13
Dm7
A♭13/G♭
G13
Gm7
B♭/C
B/C♯
78
8va
loco
hold bend

K
F13sus4
D13sus4
81
8va
loco
Gtr. 5
Gtr. 1
Gtr. 1 tacet
B♭/A♭
G9sus4
G♭9sus4
85
Gtr. 5
1/2
1/2
Gtr. 5 tacet
89
Gtr. 1
F13sus4
D13sus4
B♭/A♭
G9sus4
G♭9sus4
F13sus4
D13sus4
93

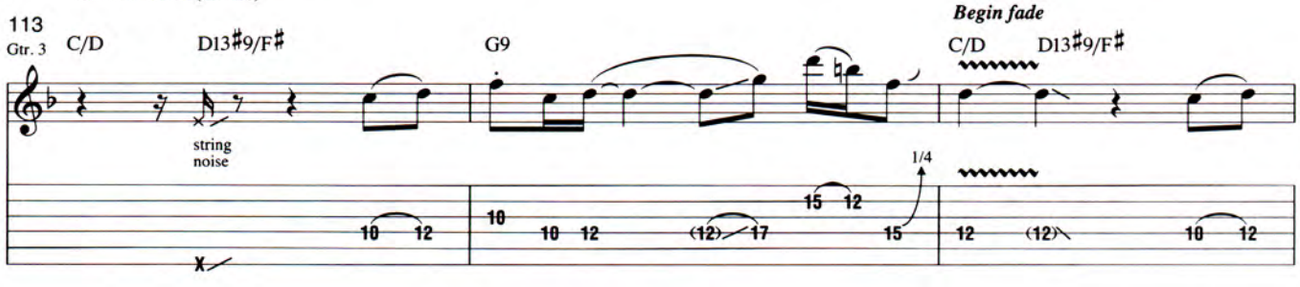
L

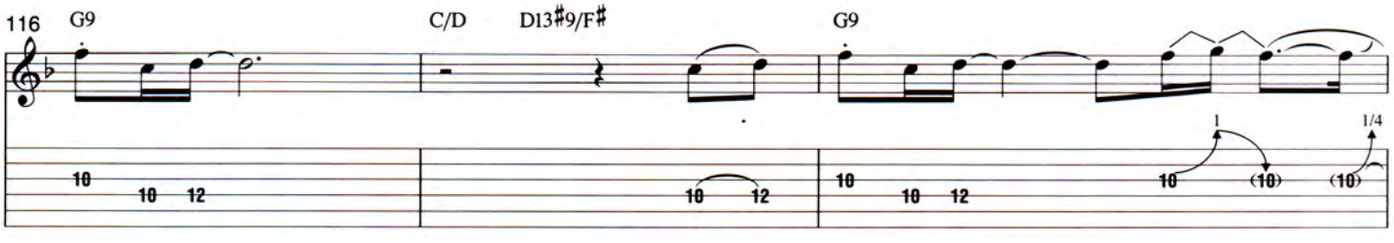
Gtr. 4: w/ Rhy. Fig. 3

D.S. al Coda

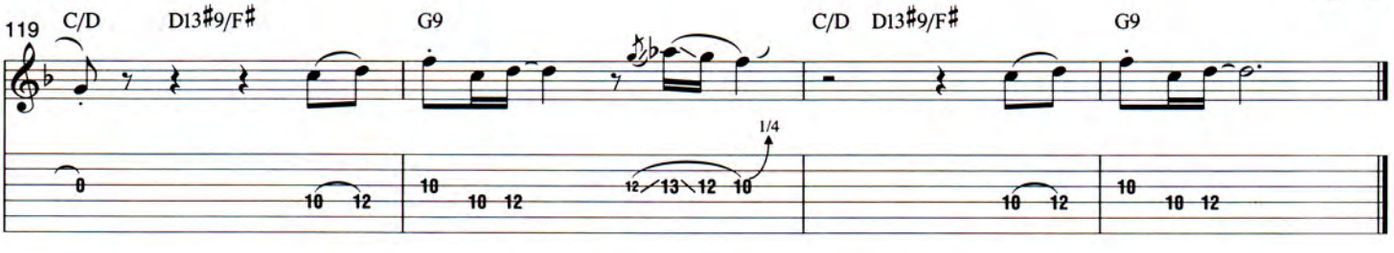
Coda

Gtr. 1: w/ Rhy. Fig. 1 (till fade)
Gtr. 2: w/ Riff A (till fade)





Fade out



Mama Talk to Your Daughter

From *Talk to Your Daughter*, 1988

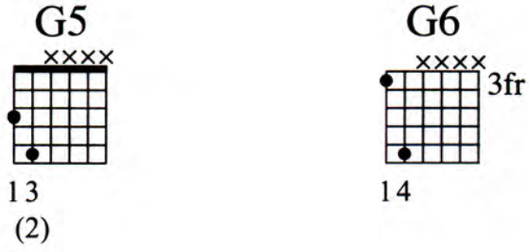
If Robben has a signature song, this is most likely it. As the opening cut on the album of the same name, it marked the first time an entirely new set of fans—both guitar players and non-guitar players—heard Robben, and his tone and phrasing left an indelible mark on anyone they touched.

Written and first recorded by J.B. Lenoir in the '50s as an acoustic piece, the romping spirit heard on Ford's version was present on the original as well; it was merely updated with an electric guitar and a modern sound—well, modern for the '80s! The song's been covered by many artists since, but for Ford fans, few come close to his recording. For reference, the song transcription begins on page 26.

Intro & Verse 1

The song begins with Russell Ferrante pounding out a boogie pattern on the Fender Rhodes. He's joined shortly by a few drum accents from Vinnie Colaiuta and an intro bass solo by Roscoe Beck (performed on a six-string bass). If performing this song as a trio, as Robben often did with the Blue Line in the '90s, you can play the rhythm part while the bassist takes the lead (transposing down an octave as needed, if there is a lack of six strings).

On guitar, the boogie pattern, played here in the key of G, is based on these classic shapes, with which most guitarists are familiar:

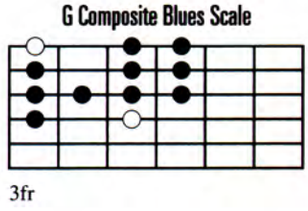


Interlude

After the first verse, Robben enters with a brief interlude that pedals on the tonic G chord. The pick-up phrase is a nice modernization of a turnaround structure—a chromatic ascent from the 3rd (B) to the 5th (D), with a low G thrown into the mix as a harmonic anchor of sorts. Grab the B on fret 2 with your index finger and then shift up to third position for the remainder of the measure, rolling from string 5 to string 6 to catch the low G with the index.

Oh, the tone! This is the Fender Esprit Ultra/Dumble combination that put him squarely in the upper echelons of tonedom in the minds of guitarists everywhere. In measures 29–32, he peels off a string of über-tasty licks from the G composite blues scale, jumping up to eighth position right off the bat and then gradually snaking his way back down to third position. There's nothing terribly difficult here, but his touch and feel is pristine. Also, be sure to take note of the staccato markings, as he alternates between short and long tones throughout, allowing the phrase to really breathe.

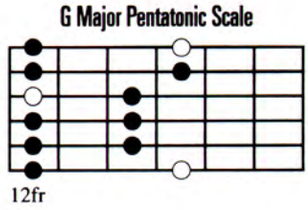
Once Robben returns to third position, he's basically working out of this fragment of the G composite blues scale:



Verse 2

In verse 2, Robben answers his vocal phrases with licks largely derived from the G composite blues scale. The first one, in measures 35–36, again starts in eighth position, but this time moves up to tenth to finish off with a legato phrase.

In measures 39–42, we see a perfect example of Robben skillfully blending minor and major pentatonic sounds. Whereas measure 39, beat 2 through measure 40, beat 1 is derived from G blues, the E note on beat 2 (measure 40) comes from G major pentatonic (or if you prefer, the relative E minor pentatonic). The phrase linking measures 41 and 42 is entirely derived from G major pentatonic:



He closes out the verse with a triplet lick in the home box position of G blues, carefully targeting the D note (string 5) at the end to coincide with the V chord, which usually appears there.

Chorus

Robben continues to play question and answer with his vocals during the chorus, but he gets a little more playful and cheeky here. In measure 46, he punctuates the first line of the chorus with a sharp, single, high *unison bend* in 15th position. To perform this, hold down fret 15, string 1 with your index finger while bending fret 18, string 2 up a whole step with your ring finger (see photo D). Normally, you'll have a split second to tune the bend so that the pitches match, but in this instance, you need to nail it right away.

In measures 49–50, check out how Robben echoes the vocal line with a slight tongue-in-cheek attitude. And in measures 55–56, Robben revs up for his solo by repeating the classic triplet pentatonic bending lick, played here in third position. You know something is about to happen when he does this, and he certainly delivers!

Guitar Solo

For the solo, Robben embarks on a glorious journey, largely anchoring his ideas in G blues, but freely combining major pentatonic sounds throughout. Generally speaking, this type of playing, fluidity, and phrasing requires years and years of experience; there's just no other way around it. However, let's examine a few spots that could help with a little clarification.

Measure 58: For the bend on string 2 here, Robben uses a big, ascending *rake* to give it a lot of weight. To perform this move, lay your pick-hand palm on the lower strings, in front of the bridge (see photo E). You should try to mute string 3 with the tip of your bending finger, as well. With your pick-hand palm in place, strum through strings 4–2. When performed correctly, the target bend note should be preceded by a "*thhhhp*" sound.

Measure 59: Shift back to 10th position and play the first B♭ note (bent to B) with the middle finger.

Measures 63–64: This portion is almost entirely G major pentatonic (until the final B♭ notes in measures 64); use the middle finger for both slides.

Measures 76–80: Use your ring finger for the bend on fret 17, string 3 while holding fret 18, string 2 with your pinky.

Measure 81: After two 12-bar choruses, Robben continues soloing over a "bridge" of sorts, which begins in measure 81 on the IV chord (C7). Check out the dramatic 1½-step gradual bend, which creates a great sense of tension and is answered by another big raking bend. To generate maximum tension, take your time with this bend.

Measures 86–88: Robben's working squarely out of the G minor pentatonic upper extension box in 18th position, before finishing up with a carefully bent chromatic line on string 2, from F♯ to E, following the A7–A+7 harmony—without flinching.

Interlude 2, Chorus 2 & Outro-Chorus

Robben takes a well-earned break for the interlude and second chorus, allowing Roscoe Beck to fill in between the vocals. At measure 108, after having fully caught his breath, he re-enters the game similar to the way he did initially, when he walked chromatically up string 5.

He spends the remaining 20+ measures conversing with himself on guitar and vocals, mixing major and minor pentatonic goodness throughout.

Mama Talk to Your Daughter Full Song

MAMA TALK TO YOUR DAUGHTER

Words and Music by J.B. Lenoir and Alex Atkins

Intro

Moderately ♩ = 133 (♫ = ♪³♪)

G7

1 (Rhodes Piano) 4 (Bass) 12

Verse

G7

17

1. Ma - ma, pa - pa, please talk to your daugh-ter for me. Ma -

21

- ma, pa - pa, please talk to your daugh-ter for me. She done made

25

me love her, and I ain't gon - na leave her be.

Gtr. 1 (dist.)

Interlude

29 G7

2. Yeah,

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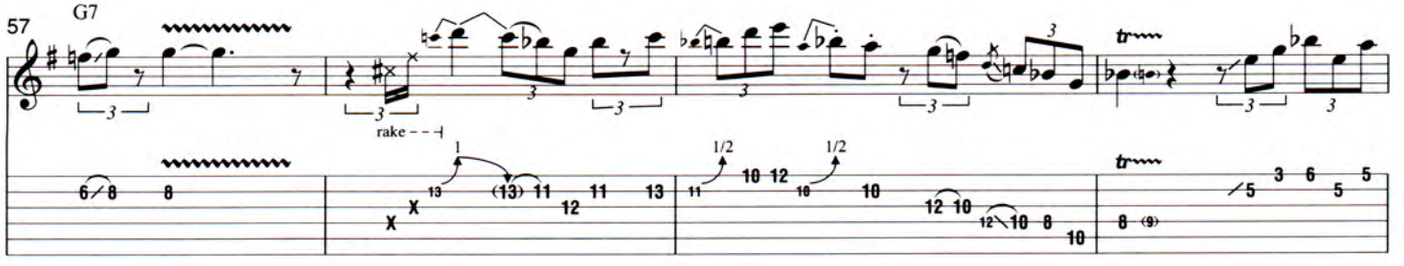
Verse
G7
33
ba - by, please don't dog me a - round. Yeah,
grad. bend
C7
G7
37
ba - by, please don't dog me a - round. If you don't
hold bend
1/2
D7
C7
G7
D7
41
quit your fool-in', put you six feet in the ground. You should talk
P.M.
1/2
Chorus
G7
45
to your daugh - ter. You should talk to your daugh - ter. You should talk

49
C7
G7
to your daugh - ter.
You should talk
to your daugh - ter.
She done made

53
D7
C7
G7
me love her, and I ain't gon - na leave her be.
Talk to your daugh - ter!

Guitar Solo


57
G7
rake

61
C7
G7

65
D7
C7
G7
grad. bend

69
C7
grad. bend
74
G7
D7
rake
steady gliss.
hold bend
78
C7
G7
hold bend
81
C7
G7
8va
loco
rake
steady gliss.
85
C7
A7
A7♯5
D7
8va
steady gliss.

Interlude
89
G7
6
You should talk
8va
6
(15)
Chorus
97
G7
to your daugh - ter.
You should talk
to your daugh - ter.
You should talk
101
C7
G7
to your daugh - ter.
You should talk
to your daugh - ter.
She done made
105
D7
C7
G7
me love her, and I ain't gon - na leave her be.
You should talk
Gtr. 1
loco
2 3 3 4 5
109
to your daugh - ter.
You should talk
to your daugh - ter.
You should talk
15 (15)
1/2
(10) 8 9 8 10

113
C7
G7
to your daugh - ter.
You should talk
to your daugh - ter.
She done made
117
D7
C7
G7
D7
me love her, and I ain't gon - na leave her be.
You should talk
121
G7
to your daugh - ter.
You should talk
to your daugh - ter.
You should talk
8va
125
C7
G7
to your daugh - ter.
loco
You should talk
to your daugh - ter.
She done made
8va

D7
C7 N.C.
129
me love her, and I ain't gon-na leave her be.
loco

Free time (♫ = ♫)

G7
133

Revelation

From *Talk to Your Daughter*, 1988

Though "Mama Talk to Your Daughter" may be his signature song, if you want to turn someone on to Robben's music, you'll probably want to start here. Written by Russell Ferrante and Lorraine Perry, and originally appearing as a vocal tune on the Yellowjackets album *Shades* (1986), Robben's instrumental take on the song doesn't stray far from the gospel/blues/rock vein. The tempo is a few notches slower to help steady the groove a bit, and the all-star rhythm section, spearheaded here by drummer Vinnie Colaiuta, has plenty of fun on this recording.

Robben's playing here is simply a tour de force of blues, fusion, and jazz phrasing, and he makes it sound so much easier than it is. This song is *loaded* with chord changes, and navigating its harmonic waters this deftly requires intimate familiarity with the song and years (yes, years!) of experience, both of which Ford clearly has in spades. Realize that this doesn't necessarily mean knowing the *names* of every chord in the song (although that doesn't hurt), but it's more crucial to be familiar with the *sound* of them. Robben has even stated on an instructional video that he probably "didn't even know the chords to the song" when he cut it. It's clear, though, that he'd internalized the sound, which allowed him to play it by ear.

His magical Dumble tone is again on prime display here, and Robben seems to take great joy in letting it sing this gospel song. For reference, the song transcription begins on page 37.

Section A (Intro) & Section B (First Statement of the Theme)

The song begins in an understated fashion, with a subdued statement of the main theme played by keyboardist Russell Ferrante and lightly backed by Colaiuta and Roscoe Beck (bass).

Section C – Main Theme

F

At measure 31, after a full run through the form, Robben enters with the melody. There's nothing terribly difficult here, but some of the rhythms are quite syncopated and can be a little tricky, so listen to the audio until you can feel it. At the beginning, Robben's starting in eighth position for the 10th-fret bend and release, but he reaches back to seventh position for the B note at fret 7, string 1. In measure 32, employ a half barre with your index finger for the seventh-fret notes on strings 3 and 1. However, you don't want the notes (D and B) to ring, so you'll need to roll your finger. In other words, you'll play the D note on string 3 regularly (see photo F), but then you'll roll onto (roughly) your first finger joint for the B note on string 1 (see photo G).

G

The rest of the phrases through measure 52 can be handled fairly easily by moving between seventh and eighth position as needed, save for measures 36, 44, and 50. Use your ring finger to slide up to the high E note at fret 12. At that point, you have two logical options for the following D note: your index finger or your pinky. Your index finger makes sense because you're already in 10th position, with your ring finger at fret 12 for the E note, but that'll mean a fast shift back to eighth position for the 10th-fret bend with your ring finger. If you shift with your pinky to the D note, you'll be set up nicely for the ring-finger bend. Either way, you'll have ample time to make the shift, so try both ways to see which feels more comfortable. Robben performs it the first way.

Section D – Bridge

The melody continues at measure 53 with a bridge of sorts, and Robben remains mostly in seventh and eighth position here, as well. There are a few notable moments to check out, though. The first is the repeated bend in measures 54, 58, 62, and 66. To perform this, pick the A note on fret 10, string 2, immediately bend it a whole step (to B), and then pick the string again while holding the bend. You should get a scooped note, followed by an even-sounding second note.

Another possible finger-twister is the triplet arpeggio phrase that occurs at the end of measures 56 and 64. You really can't play this passage without it feeling at least a tiny bit awkward. You're either dealing with an awkward first-finger shift or you're using fingers 2, 3, and 4 for the Am arpeggio on beat 4.

If you choose to play beat 3 in seventh position and beat 4 in eighth position, leading with your index finger each time, you'll either need to shift from fret 7, string 3 to fret 8, string 1 *really* fast, or you'll need to use a sort of sliding-hinge barre. This basically means playing fret 7, string 3 normally and then sliding up a fret and rolling down onto the first joint of your index finger to play fret 8, string 1. This is similar to the move we saw in measure 32, only this time, there's also a shift involved.

Alternatively, you can perform beats 3 and 4 entirely in seventh position, using one finger per fret. This may feel awkward for most people, but it is quite efficient and can be accomplished with just a little practice. Whichever method you decide, try the following exercise to help get the technique down. Regarding the pick hand, I recommend alternate picking, but you can feel free to try other methods, as well. The idea behind this exercise is to reinforce the mindset that the shift (should you choose to do that) doesn't need to be this nervous, rushed thing; you can take your time with it. Even when it's played up to tempo, it doesn't need to feel rushed. You have time to do it; you just need to learn that.

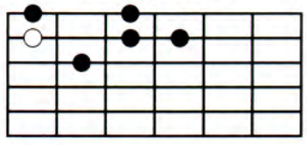
Revelation
Example 1

Section E – Guitar Solo

Robben gets a full 60 measures to strut his stuff on this tune, and he certainly makes the most of it. This equates to twice through the section-C changes and once through the section-D changes. Robben paces himself and starts off slowly, leaving plenty of room to stretch out later.

For the pickup phrase at the end of measure 68, bend fret 15, string 2 up a whole step, catching fret 15, string 1 with your pinky. You'll then relocate to the B.B. King box (one of Robben's favorites) for measures 70–72, with the only exception being the 12th-fret, half-step bend in measure 72, which should be played with the ring finger. In the key of G, the B.B. King box looks like this:

B.B. King Box in G



8fr

In measure 73, he moves to G blues sounds. Shift to sixth position for the hammer-pull combination on beat 2, and move down to fifth position on beat 3. In measure 74, Robben would most likely play beat 3 with a ring-index-ring fingering, but then slide from fret 7 to fret 9 on string 4 with his pinky, continuing on string 3 with his index and ring (or pinky) for the D and E notes, respectively. Likewise, he'd most likely use his pinky (supported by the ring finger) for all the 10th-fret notes in measure 75.

In measure 80, ascend the triplet-based B major arpeggio with a ring-pinky-index fingering. For the subsequent chromatic climb to fret 6, though, you may want to shift to your ring finger for fret 6 because of the whole-step bend, if you're not used to bending much with your pinky.

In measure 84, Robben makes use of a clever diminished device that could be repeated ad infinitum, if you'd like. All of these notes come from the B half-whole diminished scale (B–C–D–D♯–F–F♯–G♯–A), so the fingerings are symmetrical. Try the following exercise to get a feel for this trick. You can move this same fragment all over the place.

Revelation
Example 2

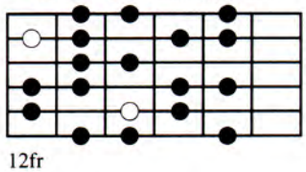
In measures 87–88, Robben peels off a winding composite blues scale phrase that can be a real finger-twister if you don't know where to shift positions. After playing the high G note at fret 15, string 1 with your pinky (following a ring-finger bend on fret 15, string 2), you'll need to shift to 15th position and use your pinky (or ring finger, if you prefer) for the 18th-fret F note on beat 2 of measure 87. On beat 1 of measure 88, shift to your middle finger for the C note at fret 15, string 5, and then shift back up to 15th position on beat 2 for the double-stop hammer-on move.

After playing the G note on fret 17, string 4 with your ring finger, flatten it out for the 17th-fret dyad on strings 2–3. You'll also need to roll your ring finger from fret 17, string 4 to string 5 at the end of beat 3, and then reach down to catch the B♭ on fret 13, string 5 with your index finger.

In measure 94, slide from fret 7 to fret 8 on string 3 with your middle finger, roll it over to catch fret 8 on string 2, and remain in seventh position for the next two beats, until you need to reach down to fret 5 with your index finger. At measure 95, shift down to third position and use whichever box fingering you prefer—pinky or ring finger on fret 6, string 2. This kind of fluid position-shifting is second nature to Robben and something to which all players should aspire.

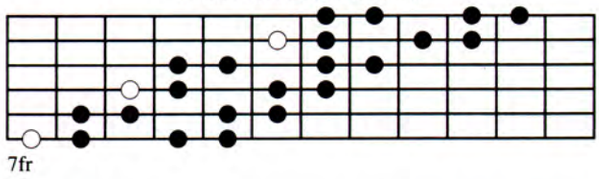
The killer double-time lick in measures 104–105 sounds like one that Robben had worked out at some point. In measure 104, it's based on the B half-whole diminished scale, which creates an altered sound over the B7 chord. Here's the full form of that scale in 12th position:

B Half-Whole Diminished Scale



The half-whole diminished scale feels a little strange if you don't have any experience with it. Below is another common, more symmetrical, form of the scale that contains four notes per string and traverses the neck a bit, spanning over two octaves. Most people would finger this scale with an index–middle–pinky–(shift) pinky combination when ascending and a pinky–ring–index–(shift) index sequence when descending.

B Half-Whole Diminished Scale



At measure 105, Robben resolves to a *pivot* lick over the Em chord. This is a lick in which one note (in this case, the B on fret 12, string 2) is alternated with a moving line.

Don't let all the drastic slides in measures 108–109 scare you; the only precision you need to worry about is the note at the top of the slide (the ones at the bottom are just for a "revving" effect). In measure 116, you'll need to use your index and ring fingers for frets 16 and 19 on string 2, respectively, so you can catch the high C note at fret 20, string 1 with your pinky.

The phrase in measures 119–120 isn't particularly hard, but it's one of the coolest moments in the solo. Robben plays a syncopated bending lick that begins at a different place in the beat each time it repeats. Colaiuta, being the seasoned drum ace he is, immediately senses this and jumps in, accenting the syncopation along with Robben. The double-time phrase that shortly follows (measure 124) is a nice ii–V lick over the Cm7–F13 change. Though it looks scary, it actually can be handled nicely in 13th position throughout, with the index finger sliding from fret 13 to fret 12 on string 4 at the very end.

In measure 125, shift to 10th position on beat 4 with your ring finger, gradually making your way down from there and reaching back with your index as needed. Holy smokes, what a ride!

Section F (Restatement of Theme) & Section G (Restatement of Bridge)

H

At measure 129, Robben follows his solo with a subdued restatement of the theme. Aside from some slight variations here and there, it's fairly similar to section C. At measure 149, he begins slipping and sliding to rev up a bit more energy for the second bridge, which begins in measure 151. He fills in a few of the empty spaces here with some tasty blues playing, particularly in measures 153–154 and 157–158. In the latter, he's bending the C/E double stop at fret 5 on strings 3 and 2, but each pitch is being bent a different amount—string 3 a whole step, and string 2 a half. To perform this, Robben uses his ring and pinky fingers (see photo H) instead of flattening out his ring finger the way some players do. This approach allows for greater control and better pitch accuracy.

Section H – Outro

After the bridge, Robben solos over the same changes again for the outro. He begins with a great, arcing 1½-step bend from D to F on string 3, fret 7. You'll really need to support the bending finger for this one. In measure 169, if you can bend fret 7, string 2 a half step with your pinky, you'll avoid a bit of an awkward stretch with your ring finger.

For the "crammed" lick in measures 173–174, slide from fret 8 to fret 9 on string 4 with your pinky and then settle into seventh position through beat 2. In measure 177, things begin to wind down, and Robben lets off steam with a descending E minor hexatonic (E–F♯–G–A–B–D) sequence that pits two-note groups against a triplet rhythm. Use a pinky-index combination for the first three pull-offs, shifting down each time until you reach 12th position. If you're not accustomed to this type of playing, keeping your place in the measure can be a little hard. Try this exercise, from the E minor pentatonic scale, to get a feel for the rhythmic aspect:

Revelation Example 3

In measure 178, he adjusts this idea for the chord changes, moving to C Dorian for the Cm9–F13 harmony. This entire phrase can be handled nicely in 10th position if you begin with your middle finger on fret 11, string 1. For the angular run in measure 182, experiment with different fingerings to see which works best. I recommend arranging your pick strokes so that you use upstrokes for frets 16 and 15 on strings 3 and 2 (beats 2–3), respectively. For the final phrase (measures 192–193), pull off to the open G string and then relocate to third position, using your index on fret 3, string 1. Guitar playin' doesn't get much better than this, folks!

Revelation
Full Song

REVELATION

Music by Russell Ferrante and Lorraine Perry

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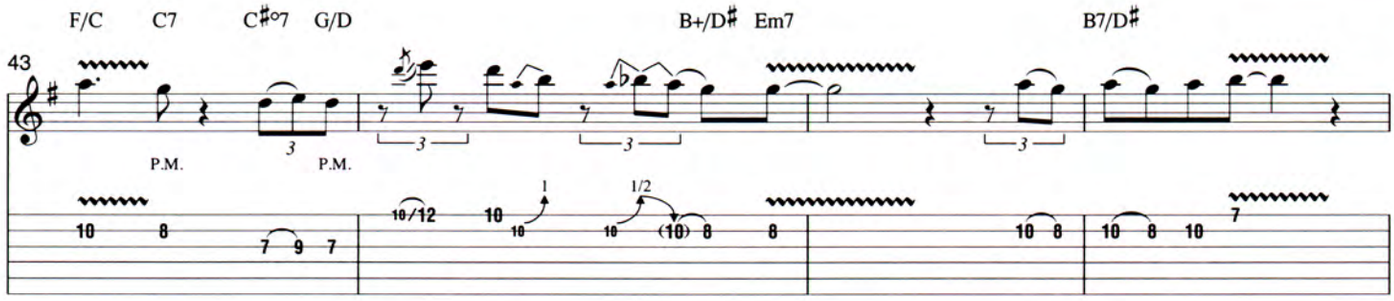
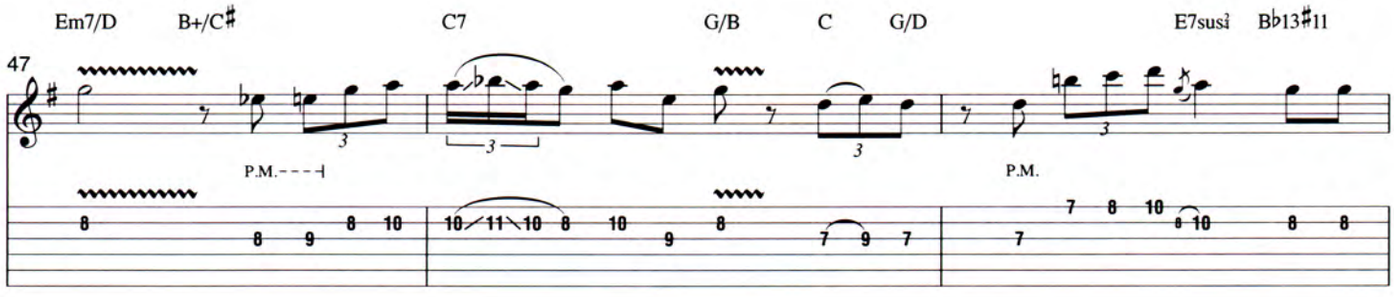
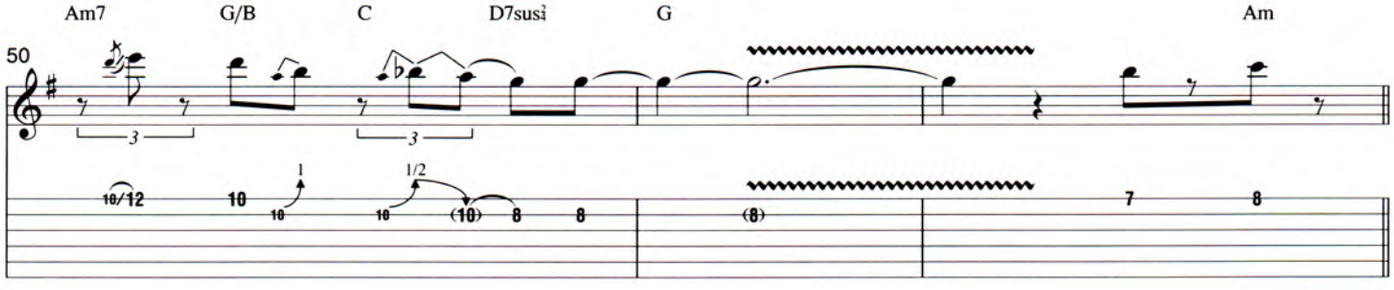
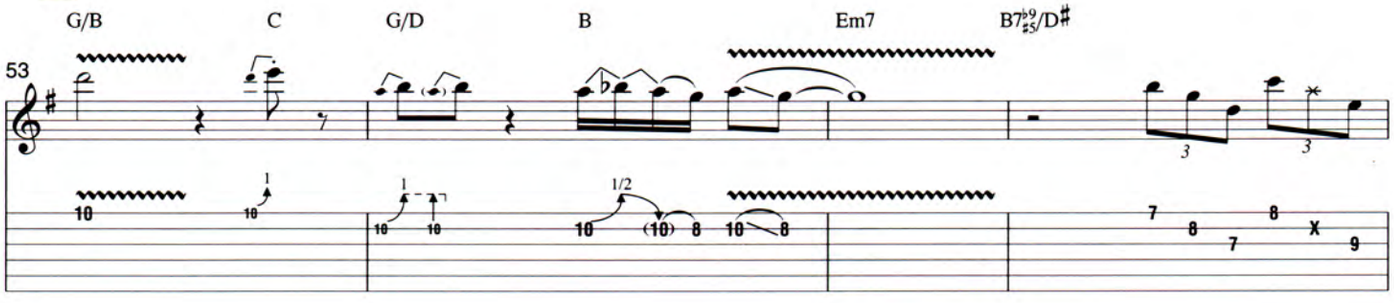
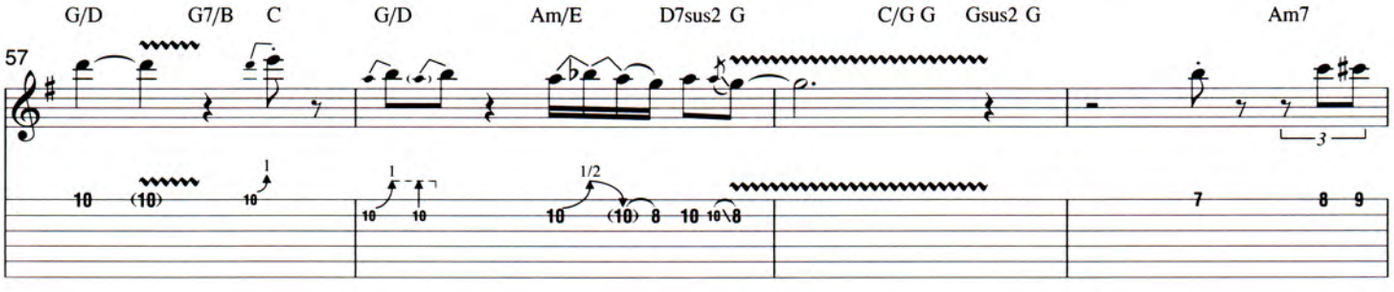

F/C C7 C♯°7 G/D B+/D♯ Em7 B7/D♯
43
P.M. P.M.

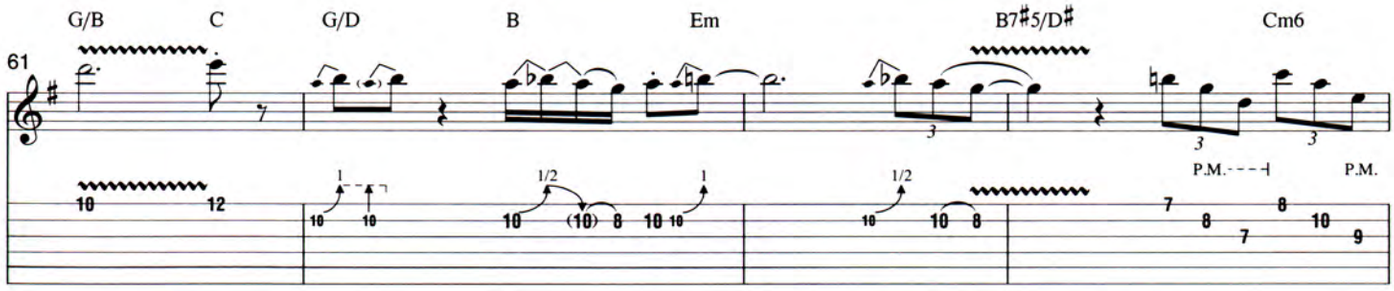

Em7/D B+/C♯ C7 G/B C G/D E7sus♭ B♭13♯11
47
P.M.----|
P.M.

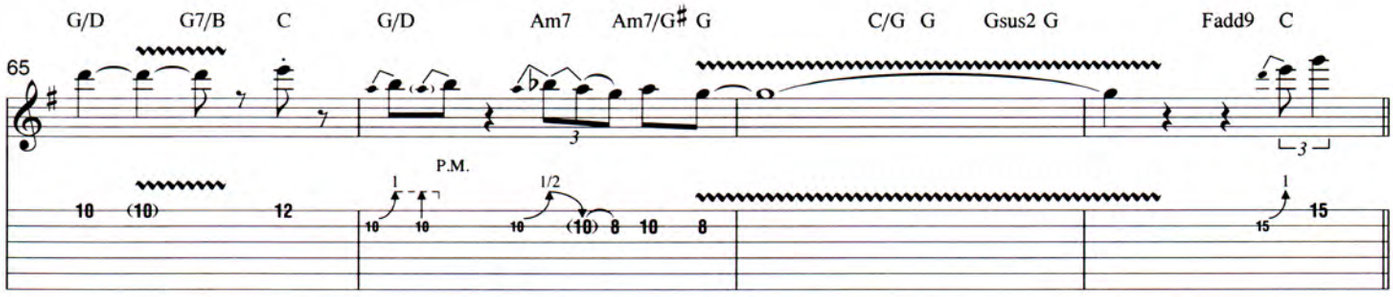

Am7 G/B C D7sus♭ G Am
50

D

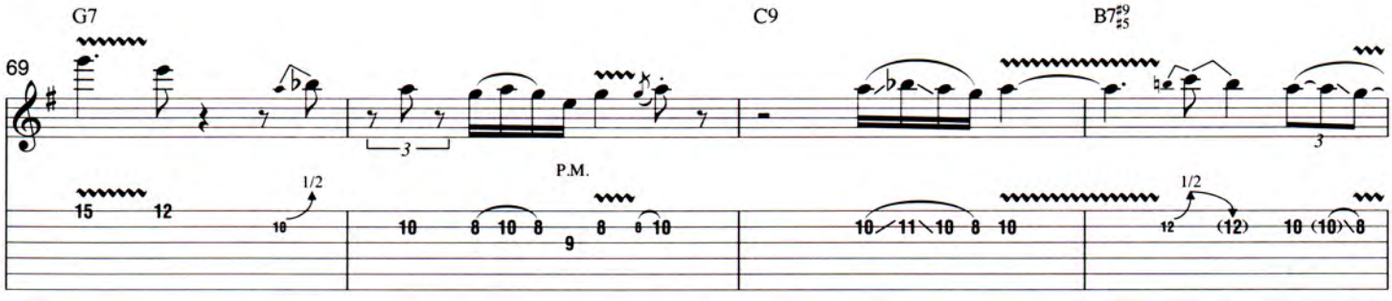

G/B C G/D B Em7 B7♭9♯5/D♯
53


G/D G7/B C G/D Am/E D7sus2 G C/G G Gsus2 G Am7
57

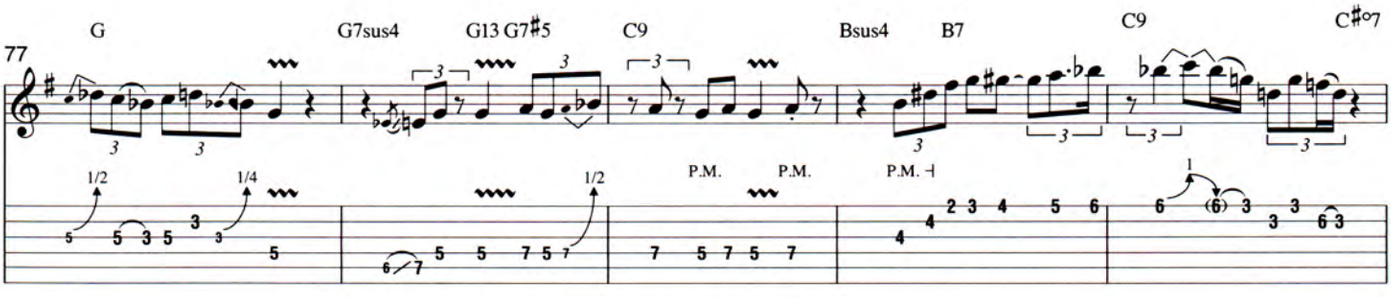

G/B C G/D B Em B7♯5/D♯ Cm6
61
P.M. P.M.

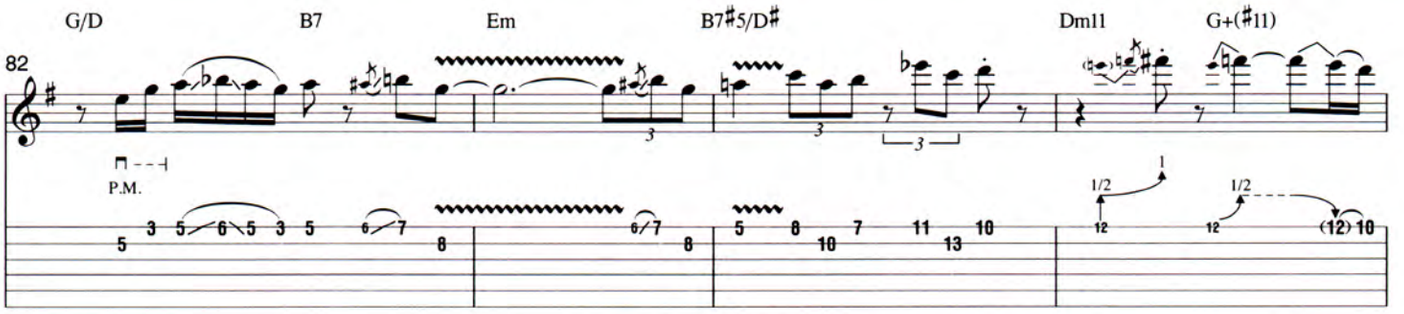

G/D G7/B C G/D Am7 Am7/G♯ G C/G G Gsus2 G Fadd9 C
65
P.M.

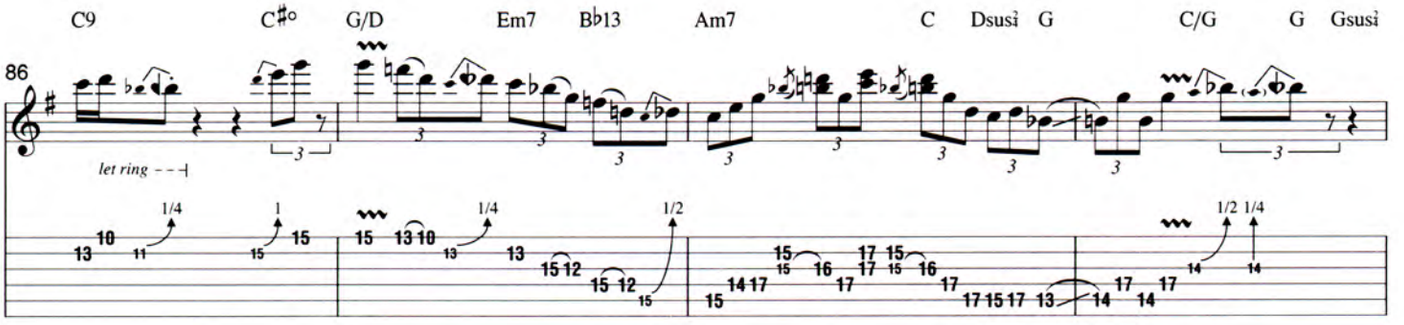
E

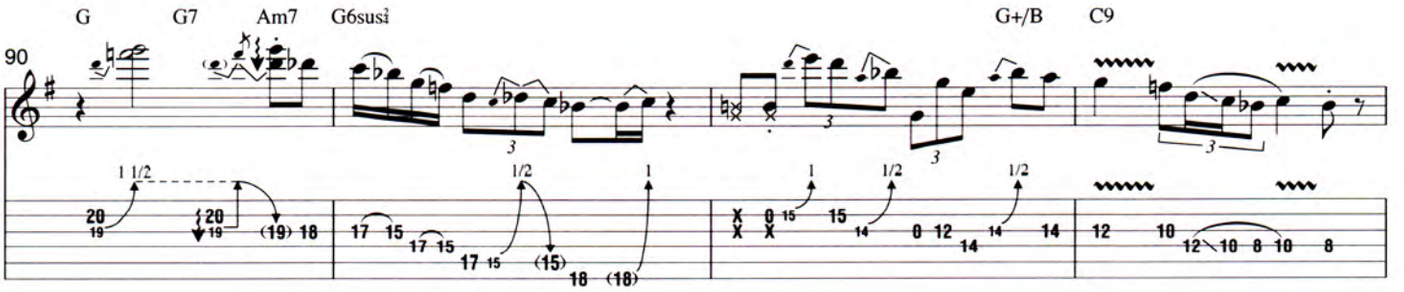

G7 C9 B7♯9♯5
69
P.M.

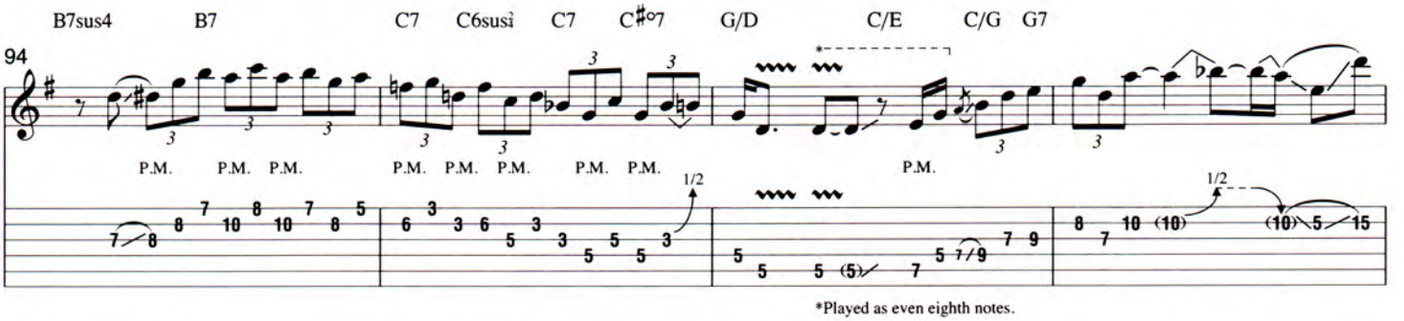
C9 G/D C/E C/F♯ G7 F C
73
P.M. P.M. P.M. P.M. P.M.


G G7sus4 G13 G7♯5 C9 Bsus4 B7 C9 C♯o7
77
P.M. P.M. P.M.

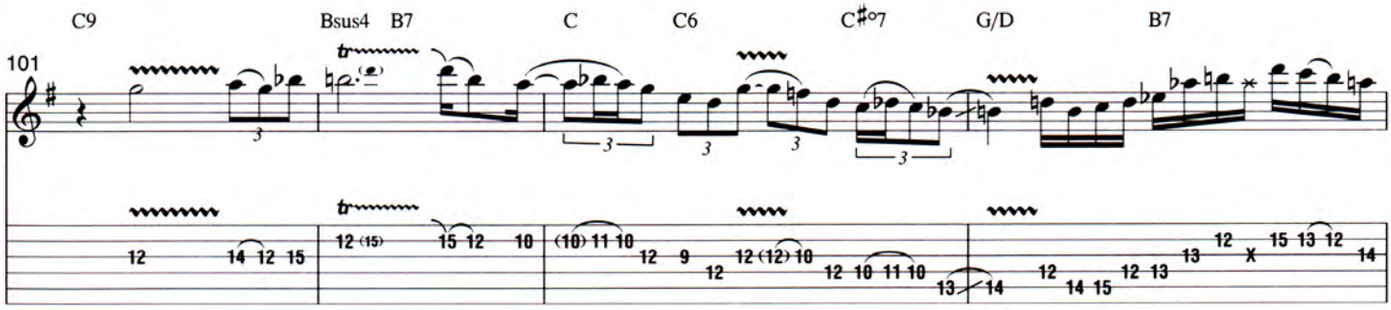

G/D
B7
Em
B7♯5/D♯
Dm11
G+(♯11)
82
P.M.

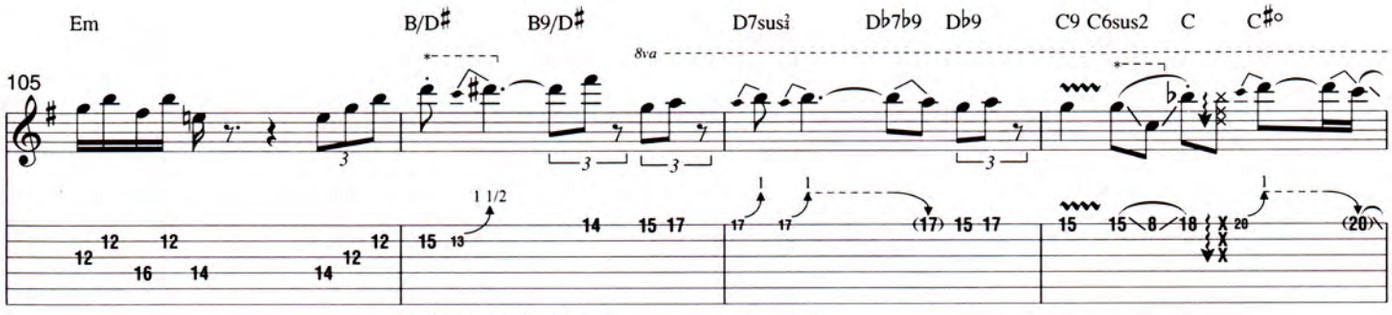

C9
C♯°
G/D
Em7
B♭13
Am7
C
Dsus♩
G
C/G
G
Gsus♩
86
let ring


G
G7
Am7
G6sus♩
G+/B
C9
90

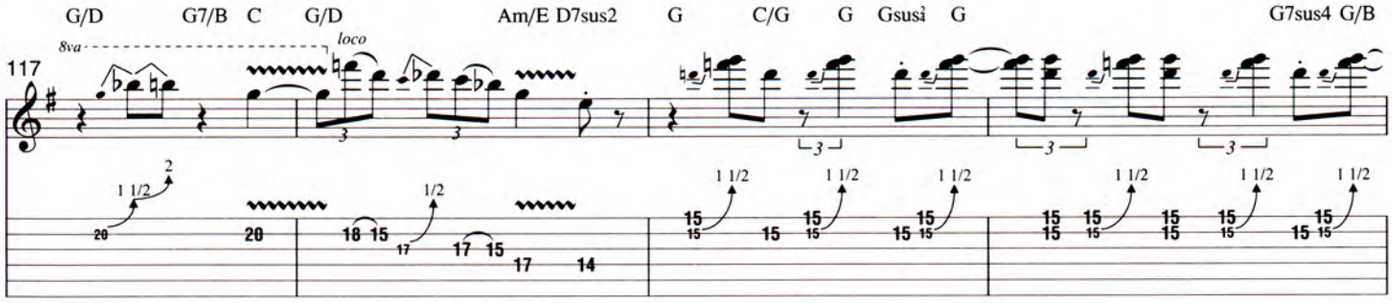

B7sus4
B7
C7
C6sus♩
C7
C♯°7
G/D
C/E
C/G
G7
94
P.M.
*Played as even eighth notes.

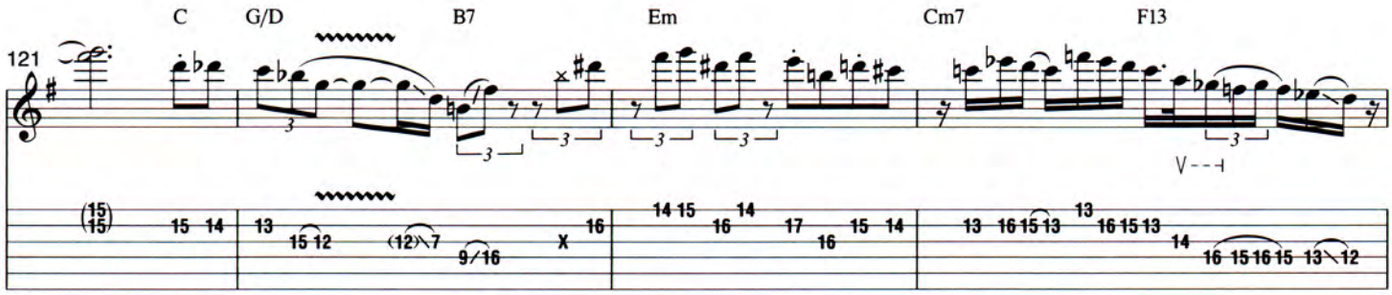
G7sus4
G7♯11
98





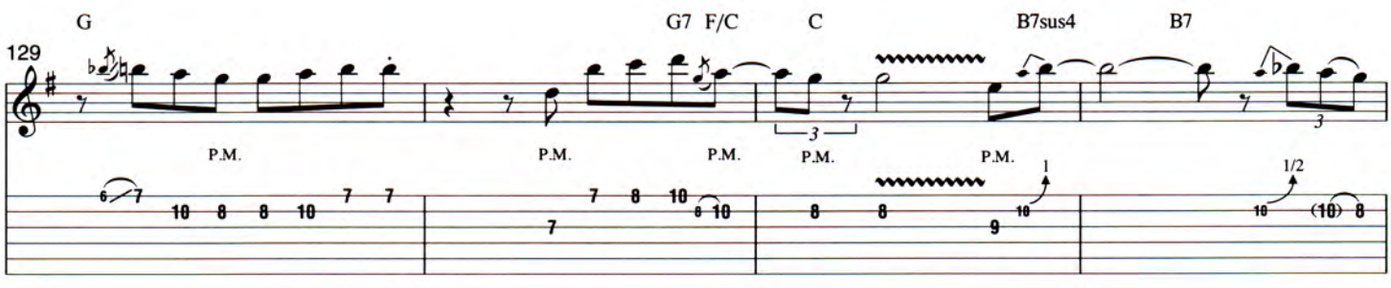
*Played as even eighth notes.

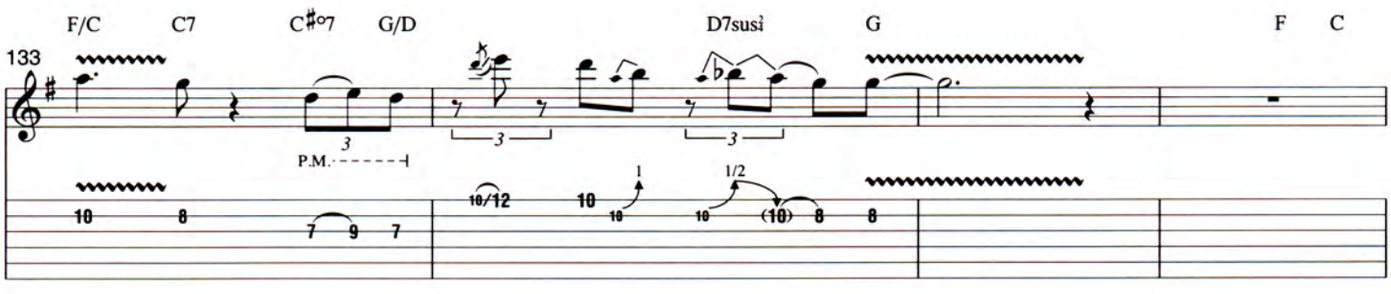


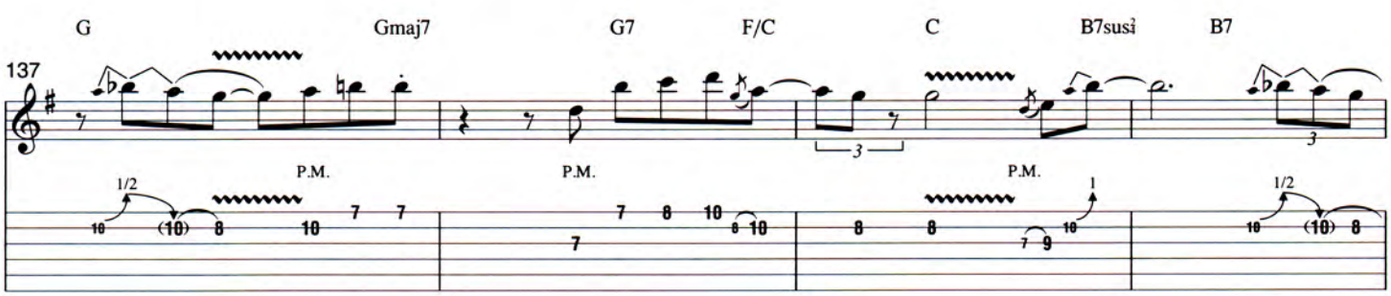

C
G/D
B7
Em
Cm7
F13
121

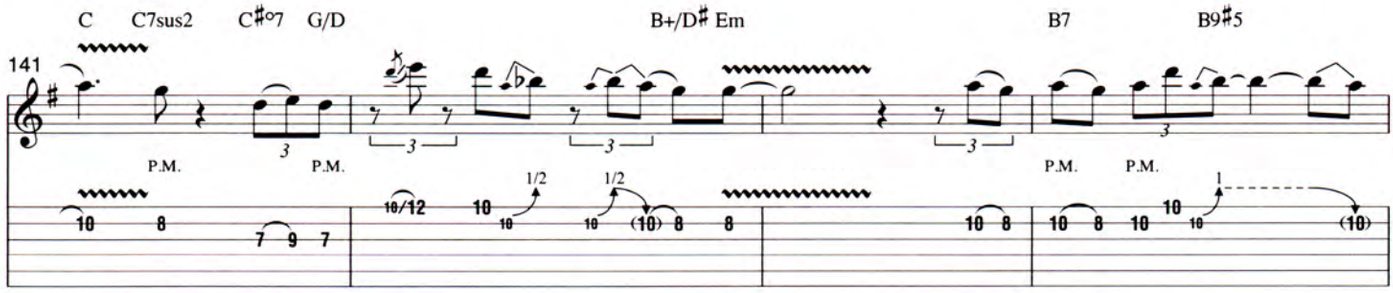
Bm7
B♭
A9
D7sus2
G
Fadd9
C
125

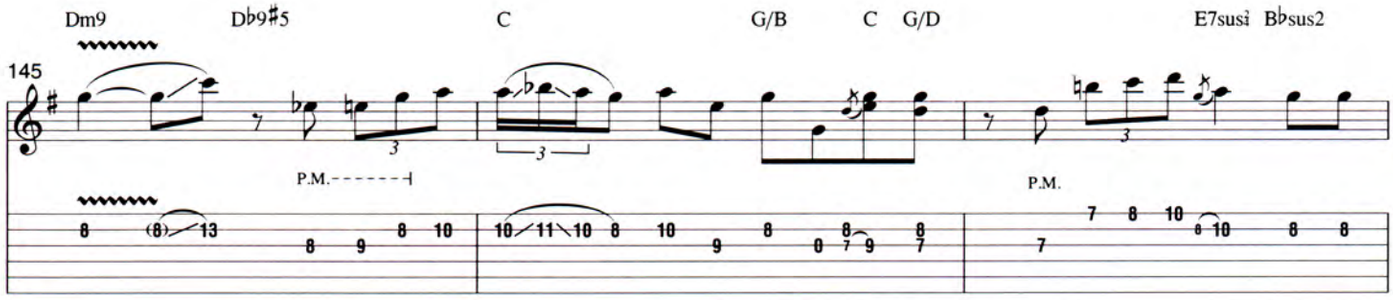
F

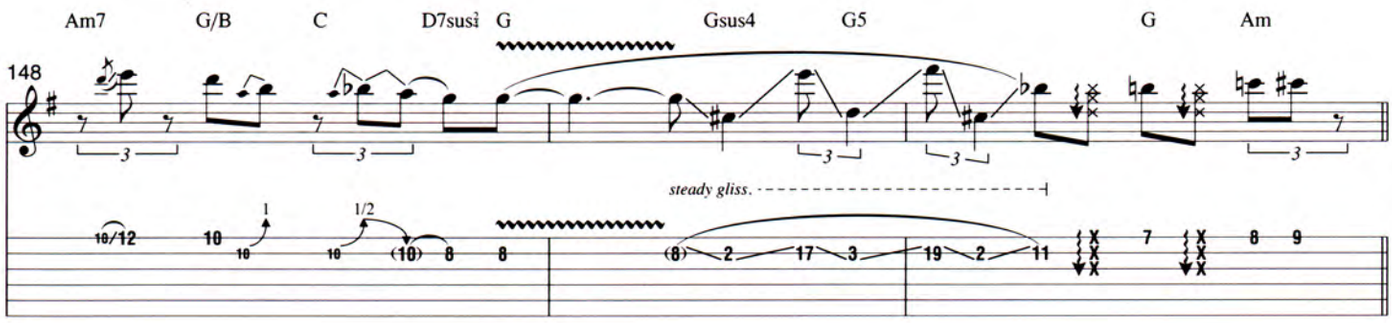

G
G7
F/C
C
B7sus4
B7
129
P.M.


F/C
C7
C♯°7
G/D
D7sus4
G
F
C
133
P.M.

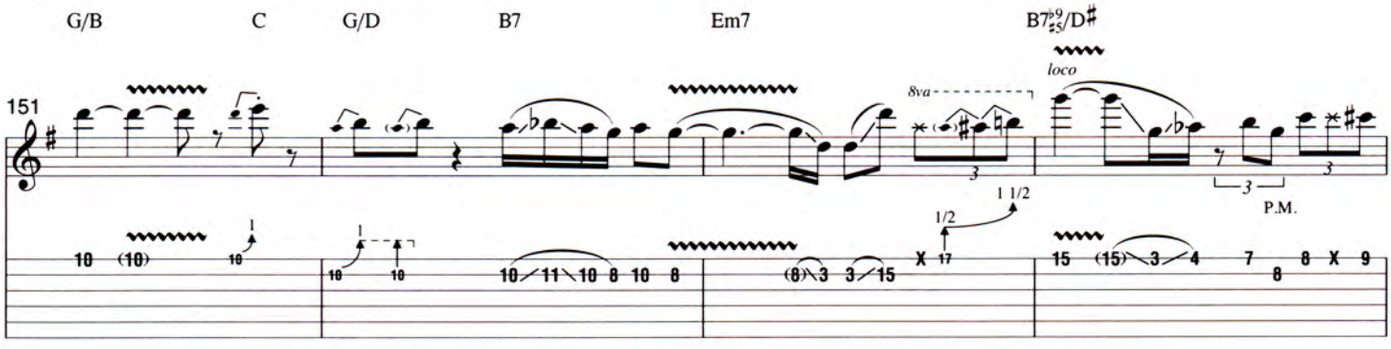

G
Gmaj7
G7
F/C
C
B7sus4
B7
137
P.M.

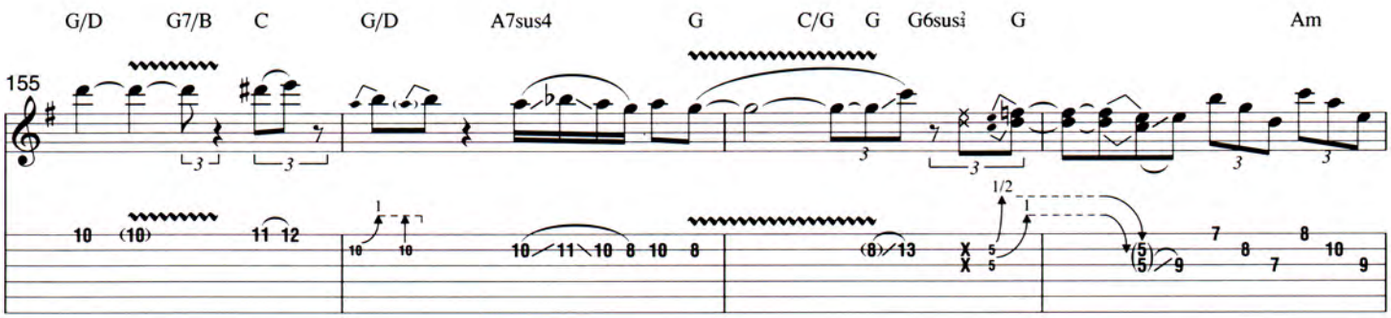

C C7sus2 C♯°7 G/D B+/D♯ Em B7 B9♯5
141
P.M. P.M. P.M. P.M.
1/2 1/2

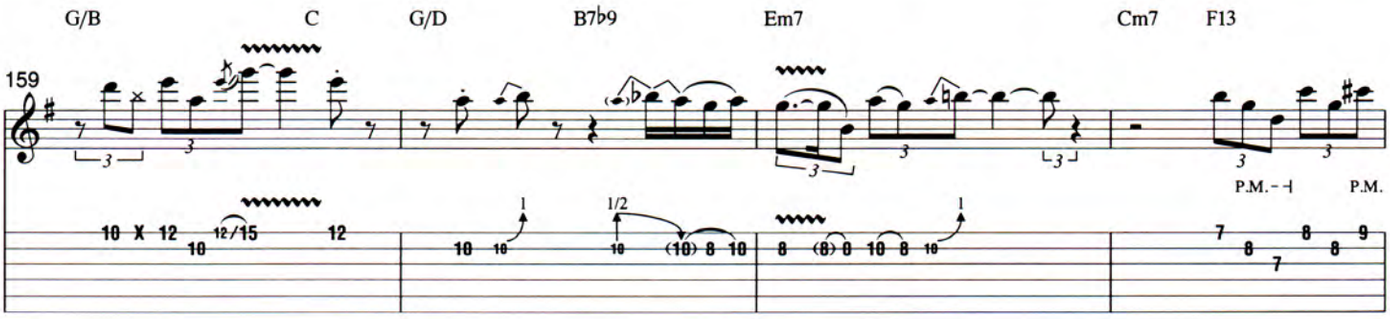

Dm9 D♭9♯5 C G/B C G/D E7sus♮ B♭sus2
145
P.M. P.M.

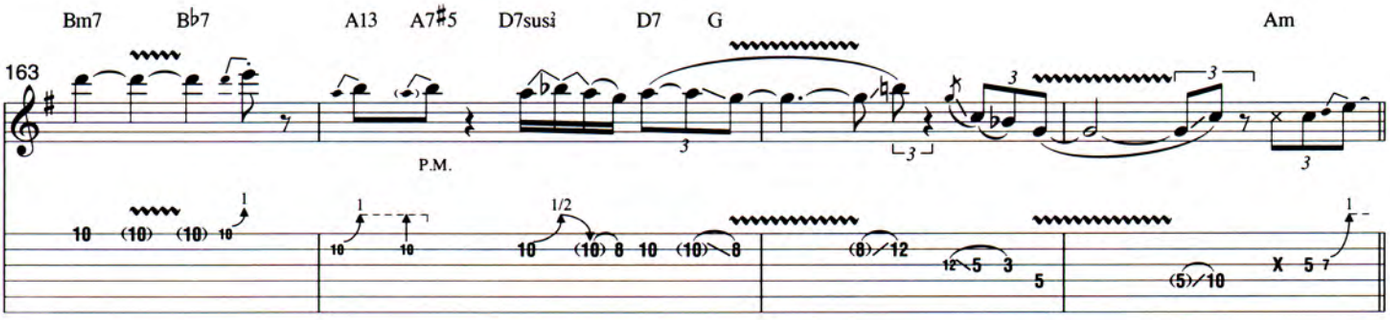

Am7 G/B C D7sus♮ G Gsus4 G5 G Am
148
steady gliss.
1/2

G

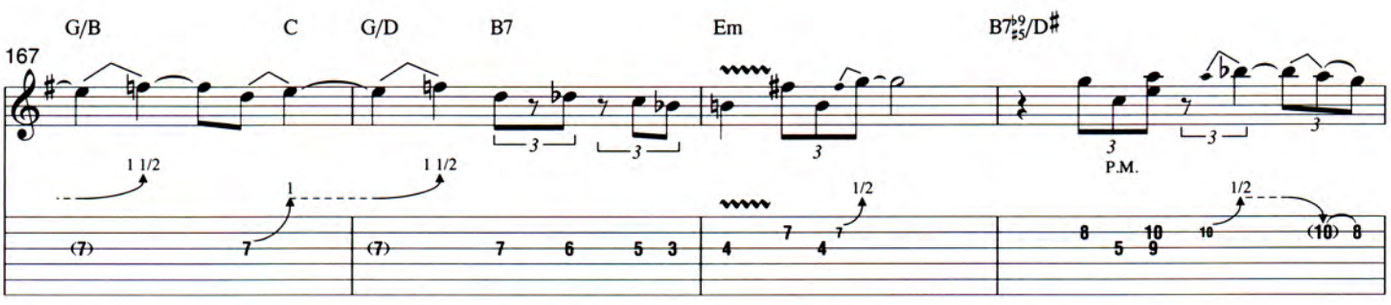

G/B C G/D B7 Em7 B7♭9/D♯
151
8va
loco
1/2 1 1/2
P.M.


G/D G7/B C G/D A7sus4 G C/G G G6sus♮ G Am
155
1/2

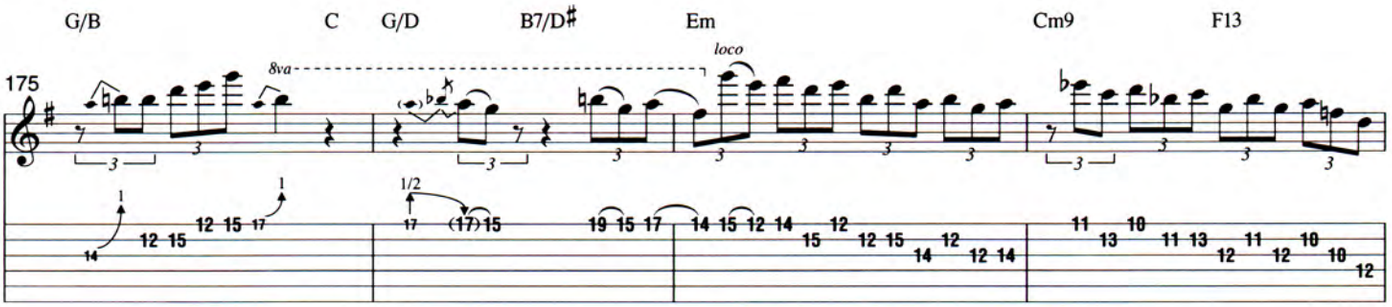

G/B
C
G/D
B7♭9
Em7
Cm7
F13
159
P.M.
P.M.

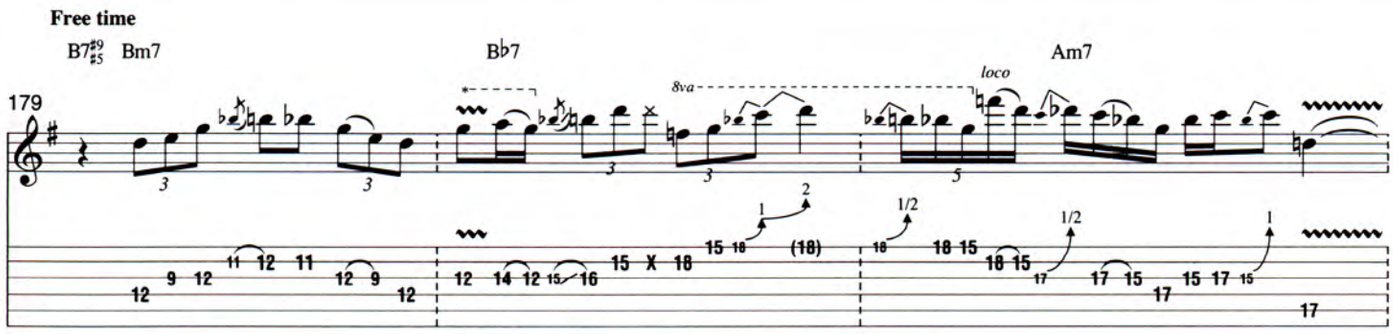

Bm7
B♭7
A13
A7♯5
D7susȧ
D7
G
Am
163
P.M.

H


G/B
C
G/D
B7
Em
B7♭9/D♯
167
P.M.

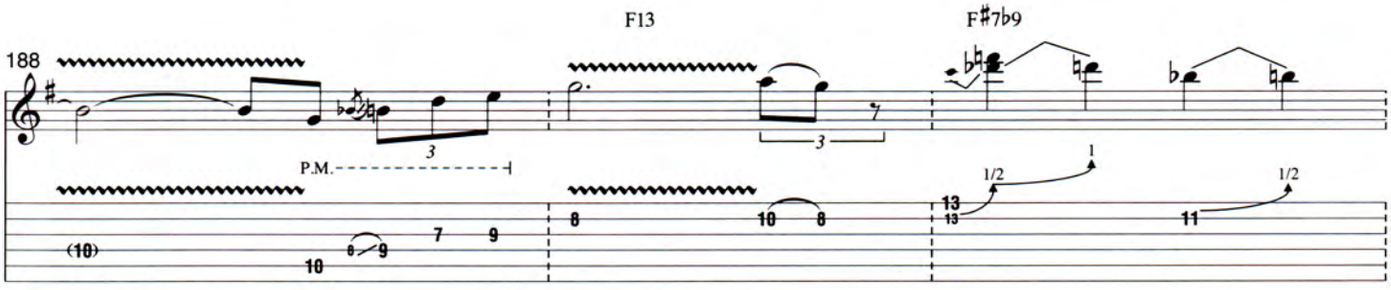
G/D
G7/B
C/B♭
Am7
D7susȧ
G
C/G
G
Am7
171
P.M.
P.M.
P.M.


G/B
C
G/D
B7/D♯
Em
Cm9
F13
175
8va
loco


Free time
B7♯9♯5
Bm7
B♭7
Am7
loco
8va
179
*Played as even sixteenth notes.

D7sus
182
**Pick bumps neck pickup.

185


F13
F♯7♭9
188
P.M.

G13
191
grad. bend
***let ring
rit.
let ring
***3rd string only

Billie's Bounce (Bill's Bounce)

From *Blues Connotation*, 1996

"Billie's Bounce" is a 12-bar jazz blues originally written and recorded by Charlie Parker in 1945. As many of his tunes were, it's usually played in a fast bop tempo. The version here originally appeared on drummer Jerry Granelli's 1993 album *A Song I Thought I Heard Buddy Sing*, and it was re-released on Robben Ford's *Blues Connotation* (1996), which was a compilation of several jazz recordings from different sessions spread over a period of four years. (The song also appears on *City Walk* [2006], which is a retitled release of the same *Blues Connotation* album, just on a different label.)

The rhythm section for this tune consists of Jerry Granelli on drums and Anthony Cox on bass, and Ford is also joined by Bill Frisell on guitar. If you're not familiar with Bill Frisell, be prepared to have your ears twisted a bit! He certainly has his own unique way of approaching the instrument; it's dissonant, beautiful, gritty, and yet down home and right in the pocket at times.

This song (and album) presents a special opportunity to hear Robben in one of the purest jazz settings that you'll hear him in, and the results do not disappoint. He's not sporting a big "jazz box" on this recording—indeed, it sounds like his signature Fender model, but his phrasing, dynamics, and groove are every bit as authentic as any jazzer. The song follows a well-established form in the jazz lexicon:

- Statement of main theme (or "head")
- Extended solos for each melodic player (including bass)
- Drum solo
- "Trading fours" – This often means bouncing back and forth between a four-bar drum solo and other members soloing for four bars; however, in this case, Robben and Bill simply trade fours.
- Restatement of the head

Although Bill Frisell's part has been transcribed here, we'll only be analyzing Robben's parts due to space constraints. However, for the adventurous spirit, it's definitely worth the time to check out some of Frisell's lines. For reference, the song transcription begins on page 51.

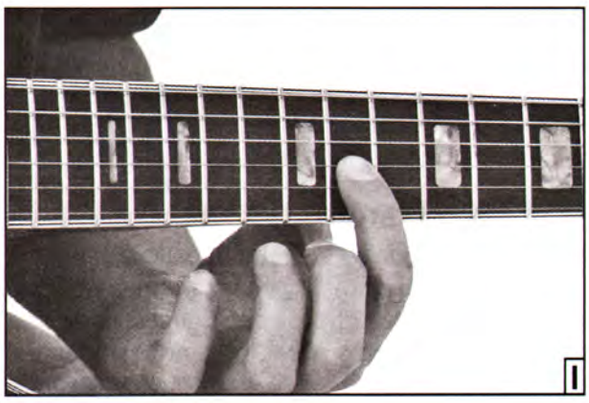
Section A – Head

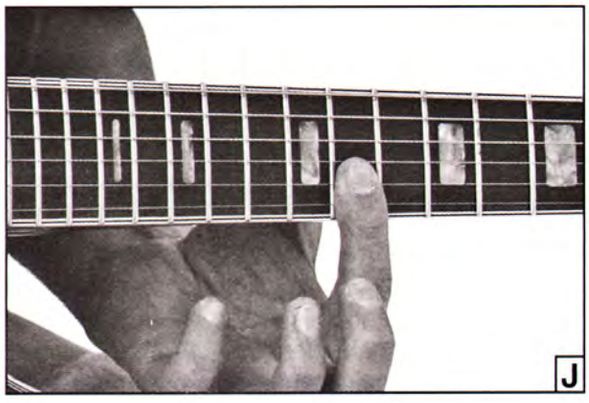
The song is performed as a 12-bar blues in the key of F, with each 12-bar section usually referred to as a "chorus." It opens with two statements of the head, played in loose unison by Robben and Bill. While Robben plays a more literal version of the head, Bill streamlines it and plays an octave below Robben, eventually abandoning the melody at times during the second chorus and comping (playing chords). Let's take a look at Robben's melody line here.

For measures 1–4, you can remain in 10th position quite comfortably, rolling your index finger from string 2 to string 3 on fret 10 when necessary. In measure 6, shift up to frets 11 and 13 on string 1 with your pinky both times. In measure 8, use a ring-index fingering for frets 14 and 12 on string 3, slide the index down to fret 11, and then catch fret 11 on string 1 with your middle finger.

Begin the descending lick in measure 9 with your pinky on fret 15 of string 1, and then catch fret 15 of string 3 with your ring finger, as rolling the pinky is generally quite awkward. For the descending phrase along string 1 in measure 10, begin with the pinky on fret 13, slide it down to fret 12, pull off to your middle finger (fret 10), and then pull off to your index (fret 8).

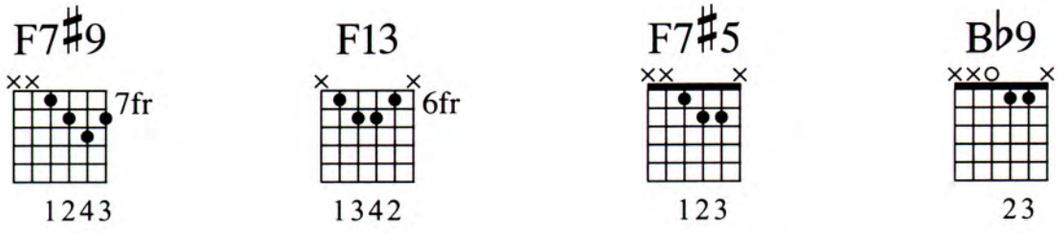
The second chorus (measures 13–24) is very similar, with only minor variations. The most notable spot occurs in measure 20, where the E♭ note at fret 11, string 1 is immediately followed with a chromatic walk-up from fret 13 to fret 15 on string 2. If you use a hinge barre in this instance, fretting both 11th-fret notes with the index finger (rolling it from the tip [string 3] to the first joint [string 1], see photos I–J), you'll be set up to handle frets 13, 14, and 15 with your middle, ring, and pinky fingers, respectively.





Section B – Bass Solo

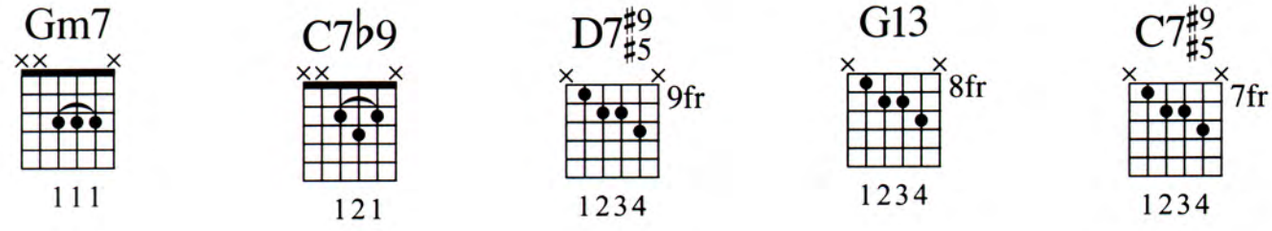
Anthony Cox takes the first solo on bass, beginning at measure 25. At only two choruses, it's a brief one, and Robben and Bill share sparse comping duties. Let's check out a few of the voicings Robben employs in this section. (**Note:** The chord symbols shown in the song transcription reflect the basic harmony—not each individual chord shown here.)

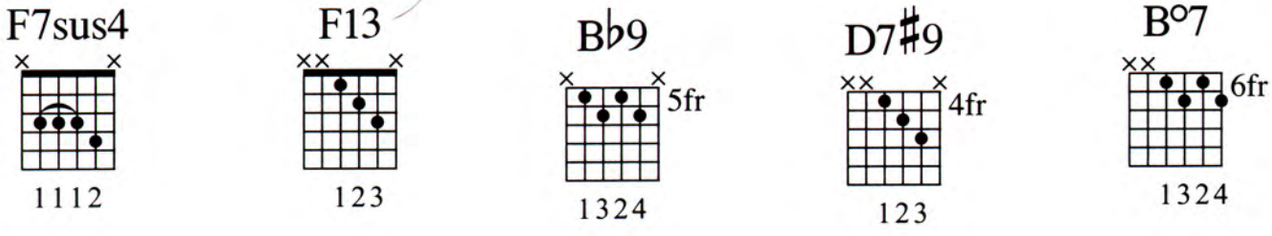


He handles the rest of the harmony with sparse dyads or single notes.

Section C – Guitar Solo 1 (Bill Frisell)

Bill takes five choruses for his outing. Again, we don't have room to examine his solo work here, but it's certainly worth investigating, as there's never a dull moment! Robben's comping is pretty sparse here, as well, allowing Bill maximum room to spread out. There are some pretty nice voicings here and there, though, so let's take a look at some of those.





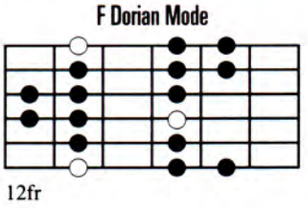
Section D – Guitar Solo 2 (Robben Ford)

Robben stretches out for a full eight choruses (96 measures!) for his solo. He plays it a bit straighter than Frisell; there are no clashing minor 2nds, volume swells, or dissonant major 7ths in Robben's solo—just plenty of good ol' blues-jazz phrasing that swings hard. Generally speaking, he defaults to an F composite blues scale (F blues combined with F major pentatonic) sound for much of the solo, but he certainly "makes the changes" (i.e., changes scales to match specific chords) plenty, as well.

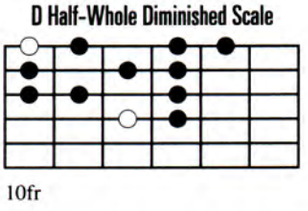
Chorus 1 (measures 109–120): Robben starts off in the low register, mostly riffing from the F composite blues scale. In measure 115, you'll need to stretch a bit to hammer from F on fret 3 to G♯ on fret 6 with your ring finger so you can continue on to A at fret 7 with your pinky. Aside from that, practically the entire chorus can be nicely handled from third position. In measure 117, he runs straight through a G minor seventh arpeggio over Gm7 and, in measure 118, closes out the chorus with a chromatic-laden F composite blues phrase over C7.

At this tempo (216 bpm), it's common for players to alternate between making the changes and completely ignoring them at times, opting for more traditional blues sounds. The notes and chords go by quickly, so both methods work equally well, and Robben makes use of both strategies throughout, with this first chorus largely an example of the latter.

Chorus 2 (measures 121–132): Robben moves up to the higher octave (13th position) to kick off chorus 2 with more composite blues phrases, relocating to 10th position briefly in measures 122–123. Notice the phrase in measures 125–126, which is squarely based in the F Dorian mode, perfectly complimenting the B♭7 harmony, as F Dorian is the same scale as B♭ Mixolydian. Here's the scale form from which Robben is playing at this point:



In measure 128, Robben makes use of the D half-whole diminished scale over D7, which looks like this in the upper octave at that location:



And don't miss how he transposes this lick over C7 (measure 130), altering it slightly to form the diatonic C Mixolydian version of it.

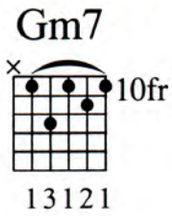
Chorus 3 (measures 133–144): Robben opens chorus 3 a bit more aggressively with a syncopated double-stop hammer/pull lick in eighth position. Barre strings 2–1 at fret 8 with your index finger and then hammer on to fret 9 with your middle finger, pulling back off to fret 8. You'll just need to reach back a fret with your index finger to grab the last D note (fret 7, string 3). In measure 134, don't miss how Robben catches the B° change by adjusting his line to B and D on string 1 at the last minute, surrounding the C note on the downbeat of measure 135.

What follows is a classic bop lick from the F half-whole diminished scale en route to the B♭7 (IV) chord in measure 137. After sliding from fret 9 to fret 8 on string 3 with the ring finger, measure 136 can be played entirely in sixth position. Without missing a beat, he slides down with the ring finger from fret 8 to resolve on the D note at fret 7, string 3. You'll be in fifth position here, but you'll need to reach back with your index for the fourth-fret notes. In measure 138, the index-finger slide from fret 4 to fret 3 on string 1 will put you in position to tackle most of measure 139 in third position, reaching back to fret 2 when necessary to complete the phrase. Taken altogether, this is quite a long, winding phrase that's best dissected in small chunks.

Chorus 4 (measures 145–156): The F dominant seventh arpeggio (alluding to F9 with the G note on fret 8, string 2) at the beginning of the fourth chorus can be handled nicely in fifth position until beat 4, where you should shift to your

index finger for the F note at fret 6, string 2. Shift again, to eighth position, for the C note at fret 8, string 1, right before the B° chord.

The arpeggio line in measure 153 is derived from this Gm7 chord shape:



You'll need to reach back to fret 9 with the index finger for the lower-neighbor chromatic note (G♯). At that point, Robben would most likely use the pinky for fret 10, string 2 and the ring for fret 10, string 3, finishing the phrase off in seventh position (the beginning of measure 154). To help goose the momentum for the next chorus, Robben pecks out a syncopated C7sus4 chord (which could also be viewed as simply Fsus4) in measure 156.

Chorus 5 (measures 157–168): Robben really kicks the fifth chorus in the pants with a triple-stop implying F13♯9, which he bends up a bit for some extra sass, and spends most of his time through measure 163 riffing out of the F composite blues scale in 12th or 13th position, freely mixing major and minor sounds throughout. By the time he reaches the end of the chorus (measures 167–168), he's really caught fire. Check out the half-steppin' that's going on in measure 168 in particular. Take this phrase in eighth position, rolling your middle finger from string 2 to string 1 at fret 9.

Chorus 6 (measures 169–180): Without stopping for a breath, Robben resolves the final B♭ note of chorus 5 to A (the 3rd of F) and continues weaving an F dominant line in eighth position, sliding down with the index from fret 8 to fret 7 on string 3. In measure 170, lead with the index finger, walking it down string 4 until you end up in fifth position for beats 3–4.

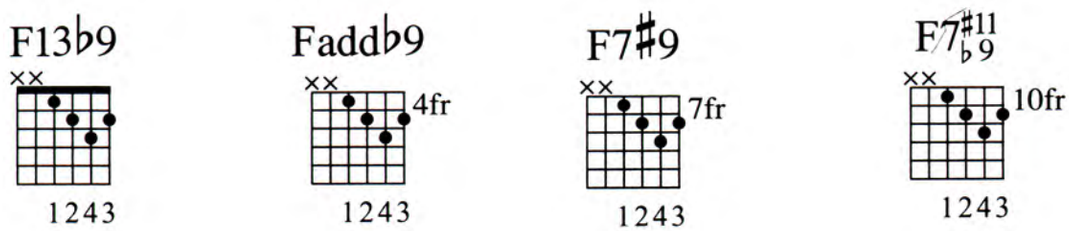
Tackle the phrase in measure 175 in third position, beginning with your pinky on fret 6, string 2. The subsequent phrase linking measures 176–178 is a bit tricky, so follow these fingering suggestions: begin with your ring finger on C♯ (fret 6, string 3); you'll slide this finger down to fret 5 on beat 4. Begin measure 177 in third position, with your index finger on fret 3, string 3, but then use your middle finger for the D note on fret 3, string 2. This puts you in second position, where you can remain until you'll need to shift up with your pinky on the "and" of beat 3 for the F note on fret 6, string 2. Begin measure 178 in third position, and you'll be in good shape.

Choruses 7–8 (measures 181–204): Robben thickens up the texture at the front of chorus 7 with some big band-style chordal hits. Though it could be analyzed as B♭6sus4, the first chord in measure 182 is really functioning as an F9sus4 in preparation for the F9 voicing that follows. We see that F13♯9 triple-stop fragment (from chorus 5) again in measure 184, which has an almost rockabilly sound to it. He rides out the rest of the chorus with typical, swingin' composite blues phrases.

Chorus 8 is what's sometimes known as a "shout chorus." This refers to a single phrase—or even just one note—that band members sing (or, for the ones without a mic, "shout") repeatedly throughout the 12-bar form, completely ignoring the changes and strongly reinforcing the tonic. In this case, Robben simply pounds out the C/F double stop for the whole chorus. Check out how Frisell loosely joins Robben a few bars in, slightly altering the notes to fit some of the chords.

Section E – Drum Solo

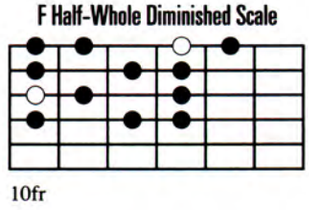
In section E, the boys hand over the reins to Jerry Granelli for a drum solo, adding a bit of sparse comping throughout. In measures 230–231, Robben uses a nifty little diminished trick. The first voicing can be analyzed as F7♯9. This form can be moved up or down in minor 3rds, just like a diminished seventh chord, to generate other altered F dominant chords. Check it out:



Section F – Trading Fours

After the drum solo, Robben and Bill "trade fours" (i.e., take turns soloing for four measures). Bill begins, and Robben takes over on the IV chord (measure 257) with some F Dorian lines (not including the B♮ pickup note) in third position. In measures 259–260, he peels off a "popcorn lick," which is a name sometimes given to a nonsensical phrase that's more tongue-in-cheek than anything. Here, he's sliding perfect 4th intervals back and forth chromatically while descending the strings.

At measure 265, it's Robben's turn to kick off the new chorus, and having used his popcorn-lick pass already, he returns to bop form, making the changes like a seasoned pro. Measures 265–266 can be handled in 10th position. At the beginning of measure 267, briefly shift up to 11th position and then return to 10th position at the end of it, remaining there through the conclusion of the phrase (measure 269). Robben is working beautifully out of the F half-whole diminished scale form in (mostly) 10th position here, resolving beautifully to the B♭7 chord. The scale form looks like this:



In measures 273–276, Robben rides out the chorus with composite blues phrases mostly in 13th position. For the organ-inspired lick in measure 276, anchor your pinky on fret 13, string 1 and slide your middle finger from fret 11 to fret 12 on string 2. Relocate to eighth position for the subsequent closing phrase, rolling your ring finger from string 3 to string 4 on fret 10.

For the phrase that spans measures 289–291, use your index finger for all the notes on string 2, save for fret 11 (middle) and fret 13 (middle). The ascending G minor ninth arpeggio in measure 297 can be played with either a pinky-ring-index-index fingering or a ring-middle-index-index combo. Remain in 10th position for the beginning of measure 298, but shift back to eighth position on beat 3 for the G note at fret 8, string 2.

Section G – Restatement of Head

At measure 313, after everyone's had their fun, the boys wrap it up by restating the melody again—twice. In measures 335–336, Robben goes out by pounding out an F7♯9 voicing a few times before finally coming to rest on F7♯9♭5, with Frisell playing an A major triad against it!

Billie's Bounce
Full Song

BILLIE'S BOUNCE (BILL'S BOUNCE)

By Charlie Parker

A

Fast ♩ = 216 (♫ = ♪♪)

***Chord symbols reflect basic harmony.

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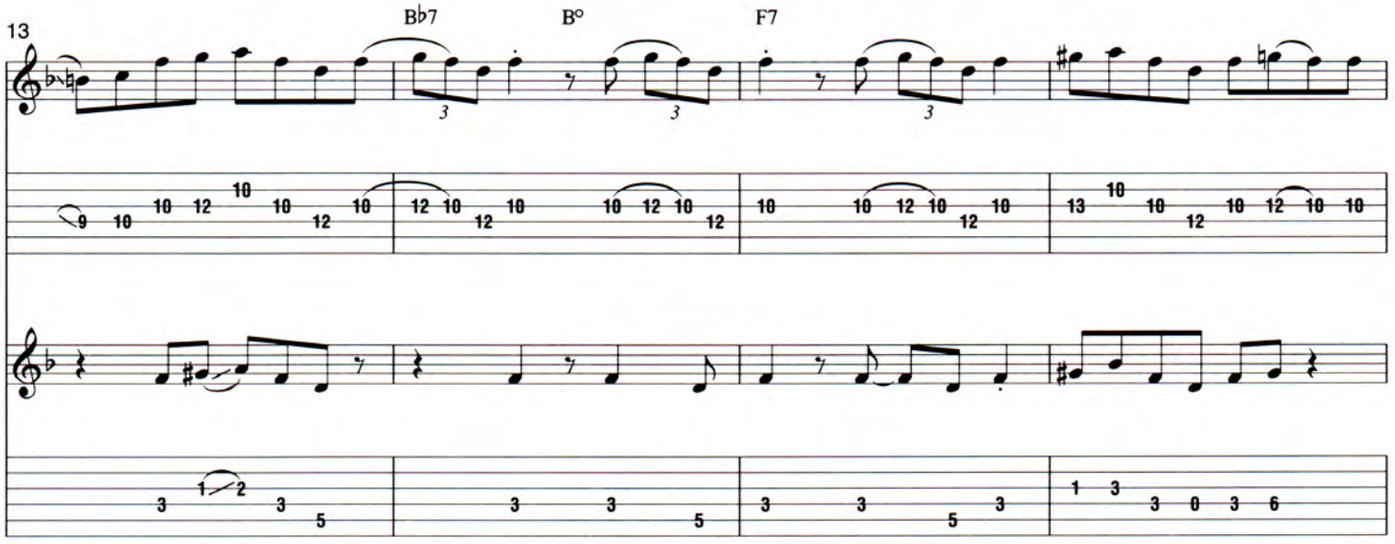
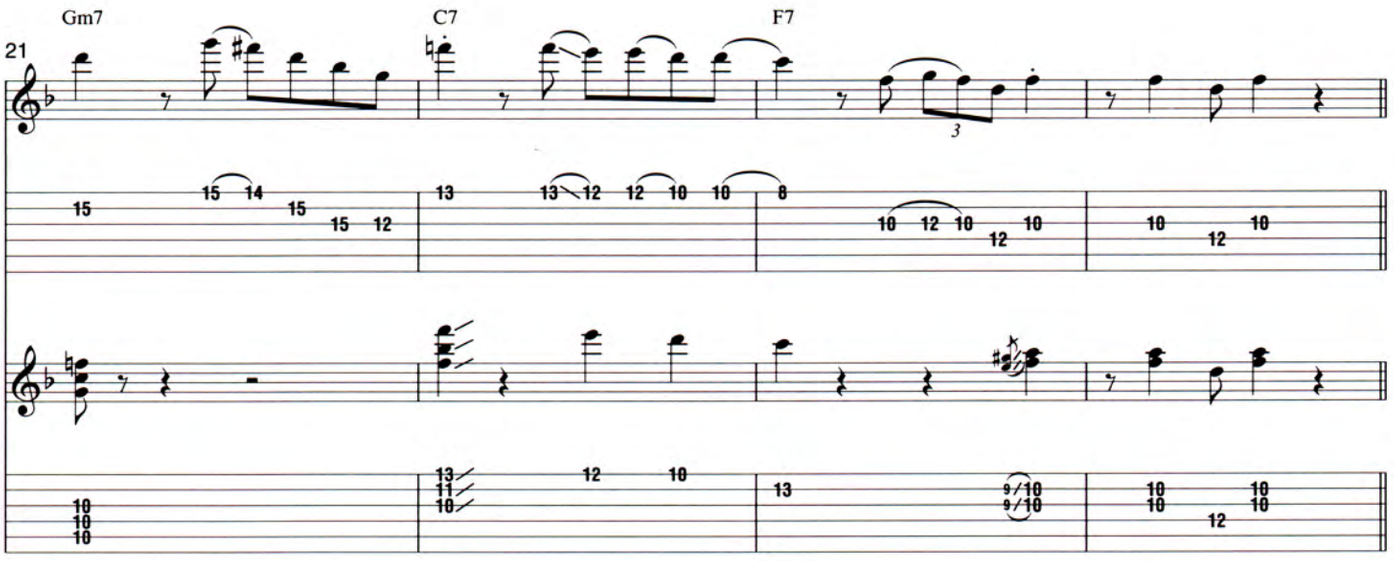
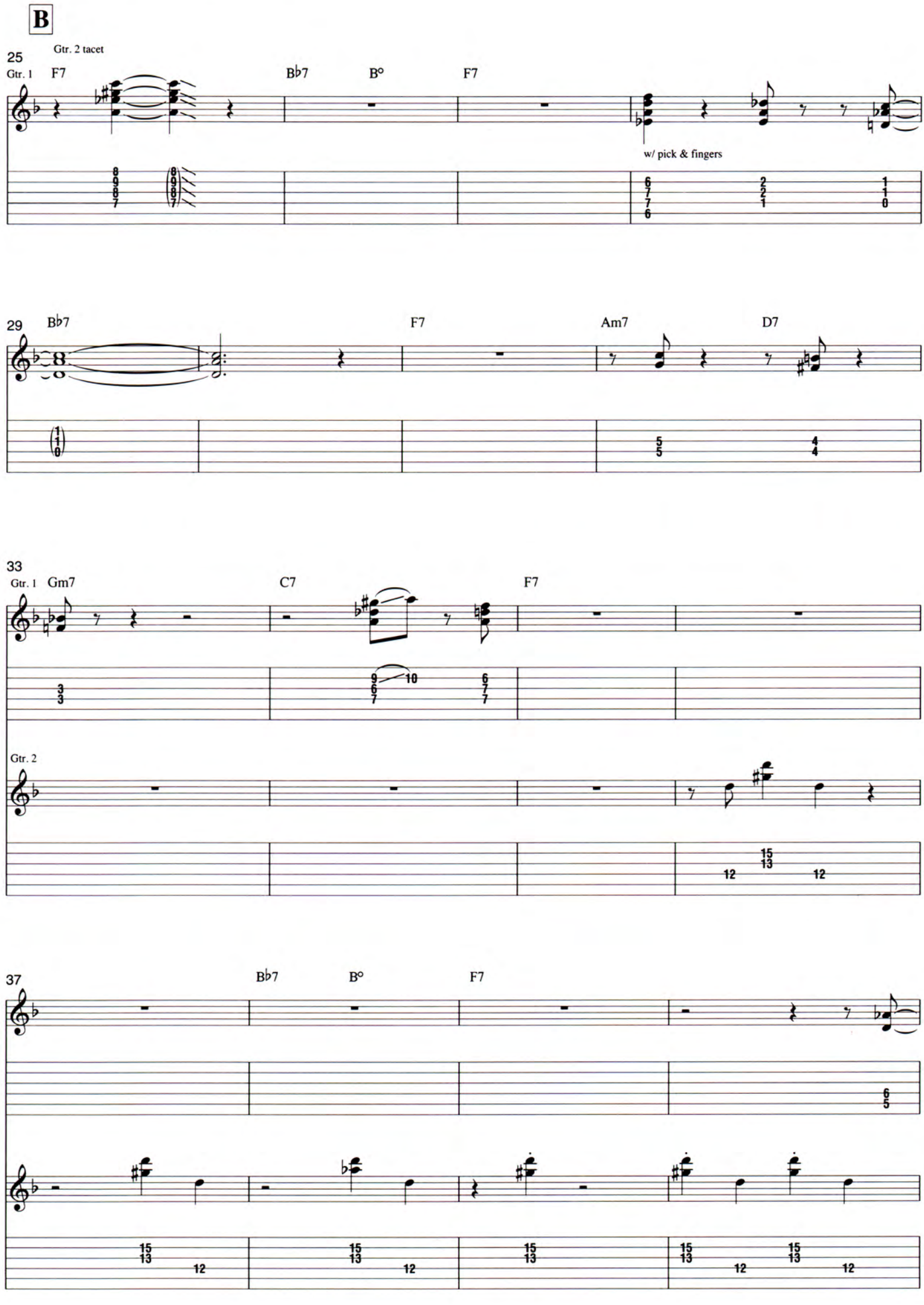
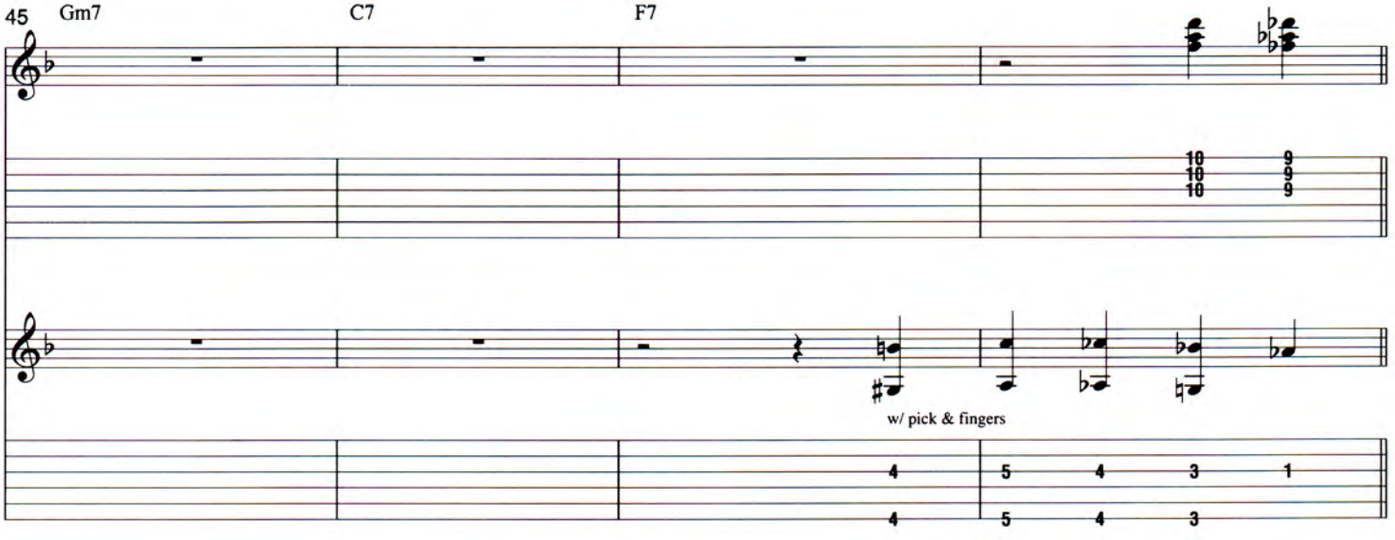

13
B♭7
B°
F7

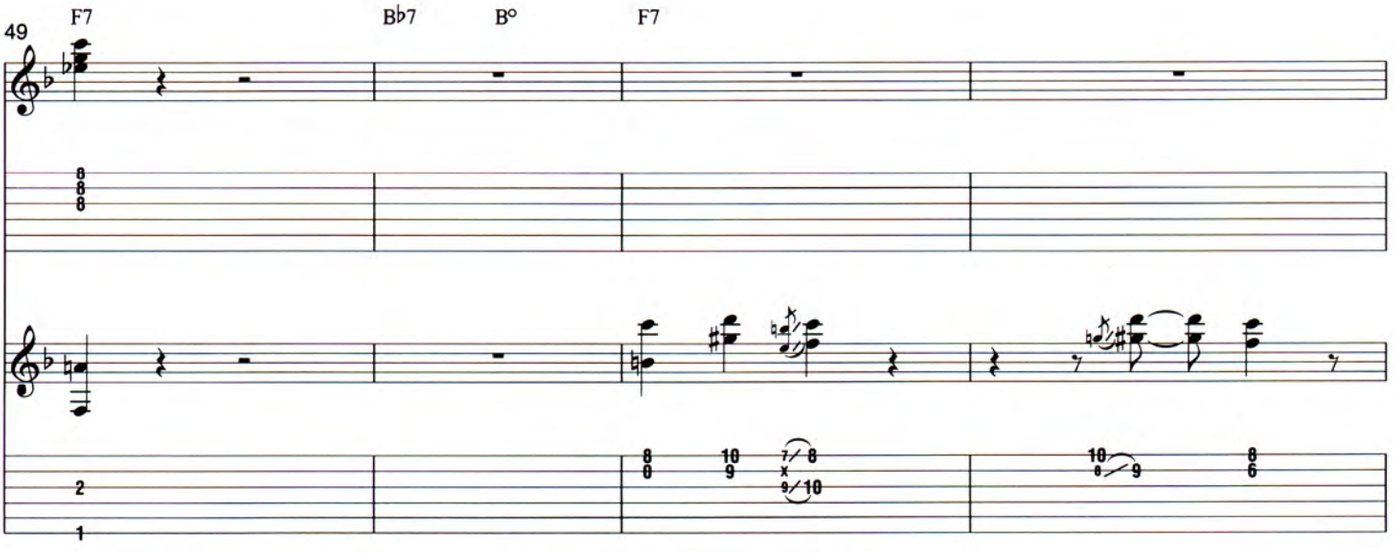
17
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7


21
Gm7
C7
F7

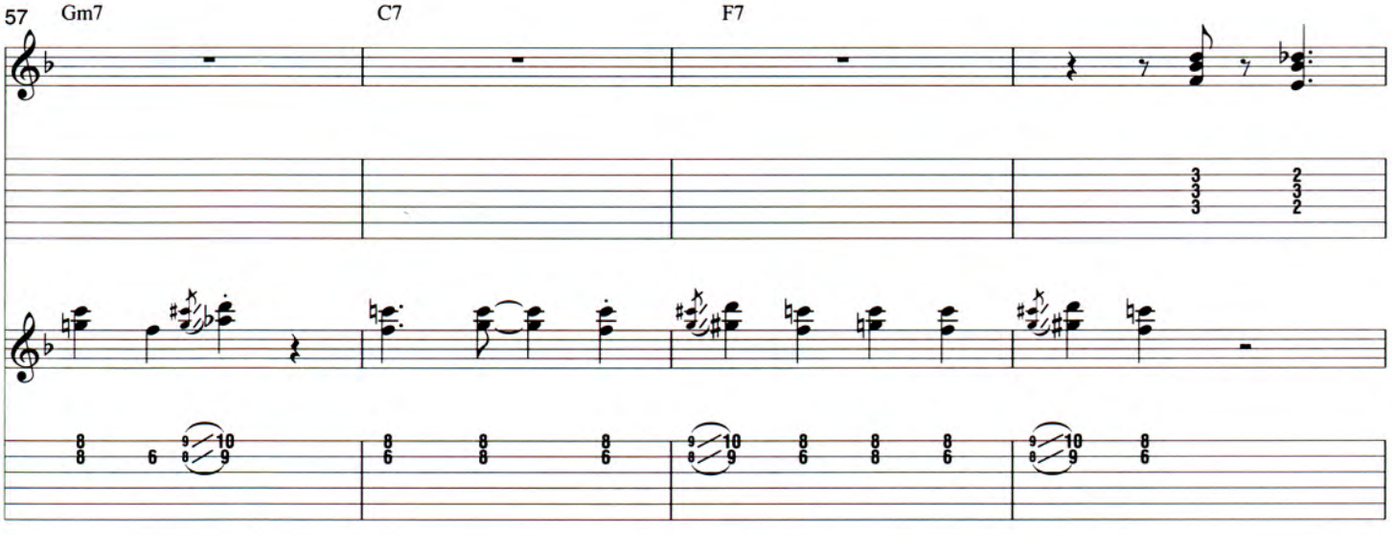

B
25
Gtr. 1
Gtr. 2 tacet
F7
B♭7
B°
F7
w/ pick & fingers
29
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7
33
Gtr. 1
Gm7
C7
F7
Gtr. 2
37
B♭7
B°
F7



C

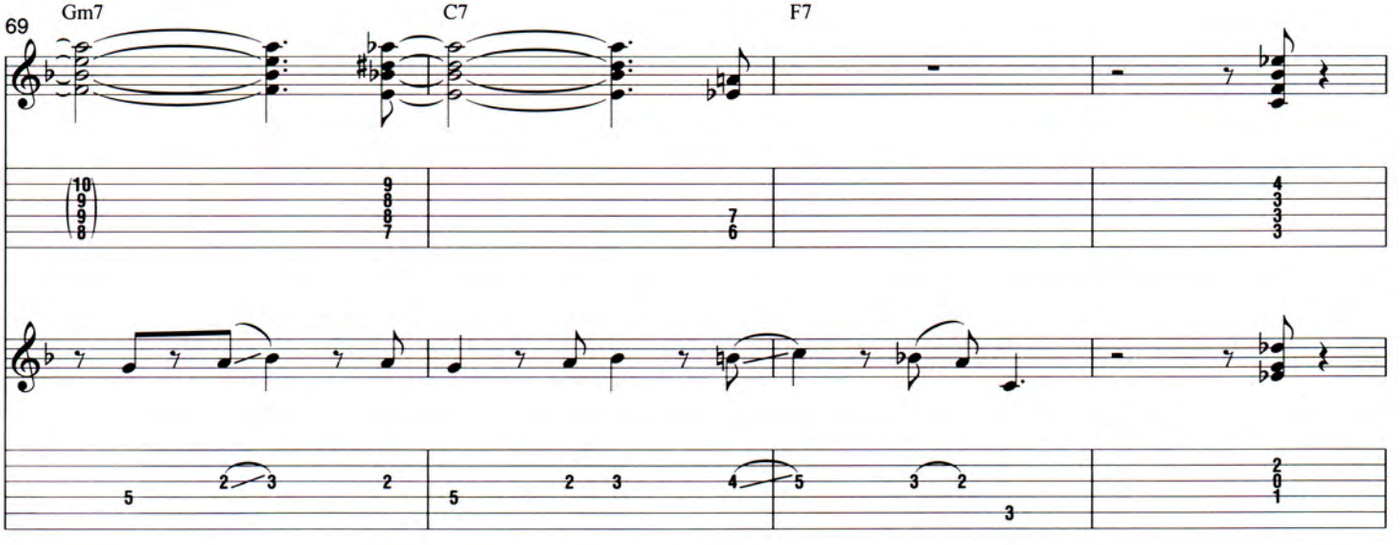


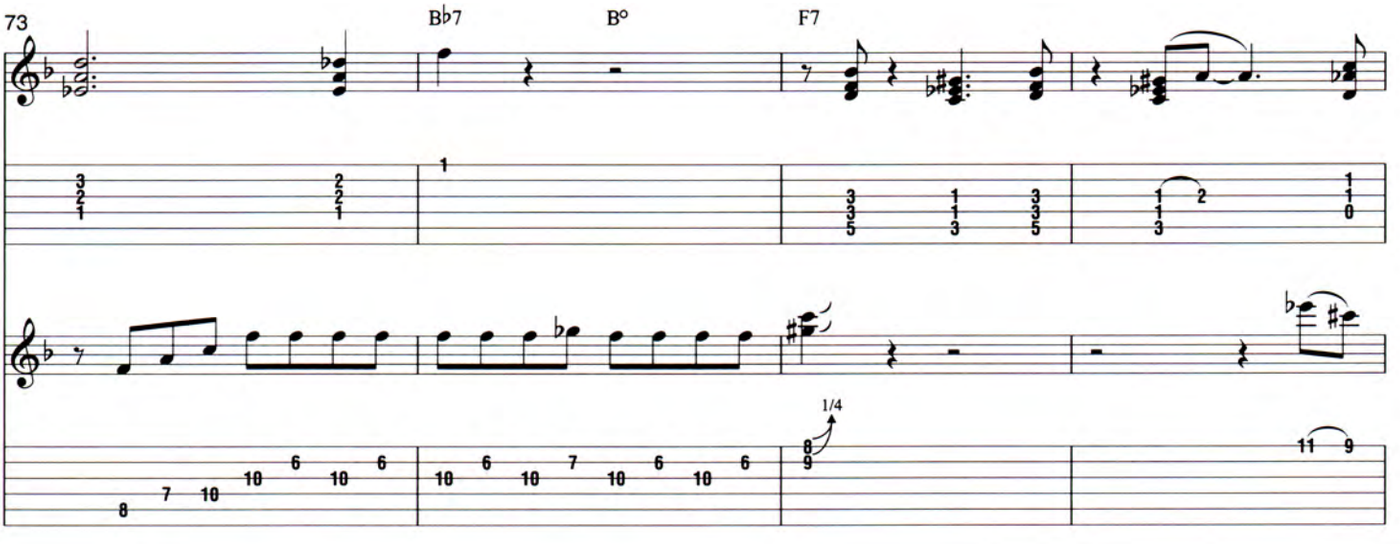
53
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7

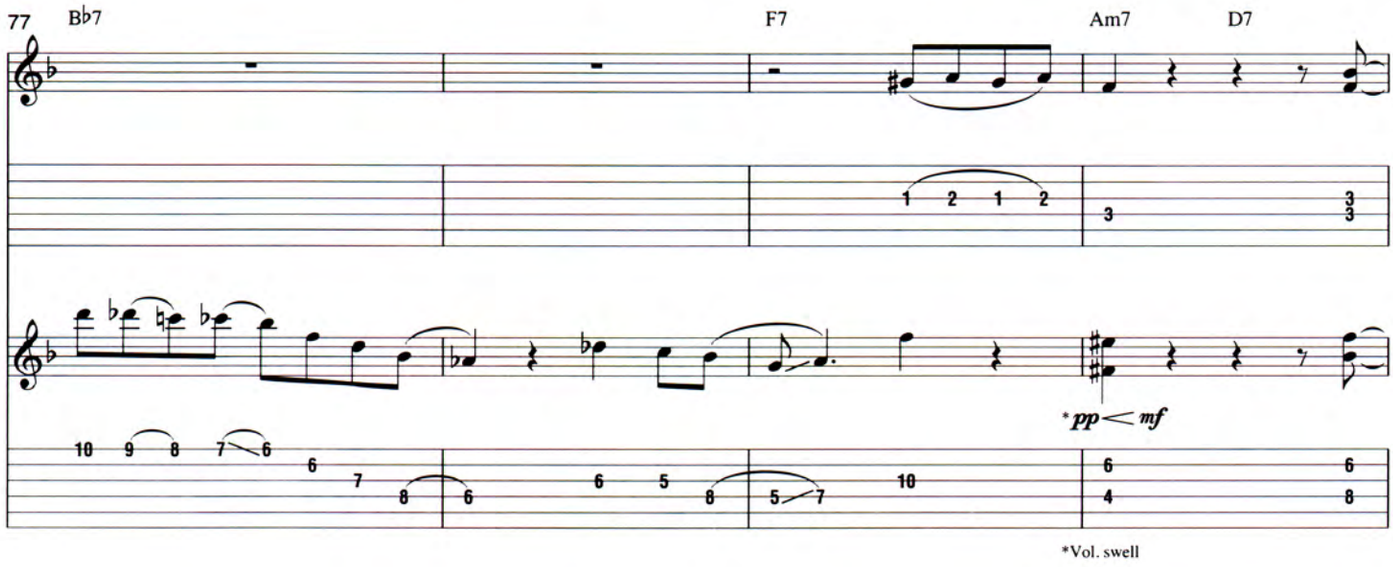

57
Gm7
C7
F7

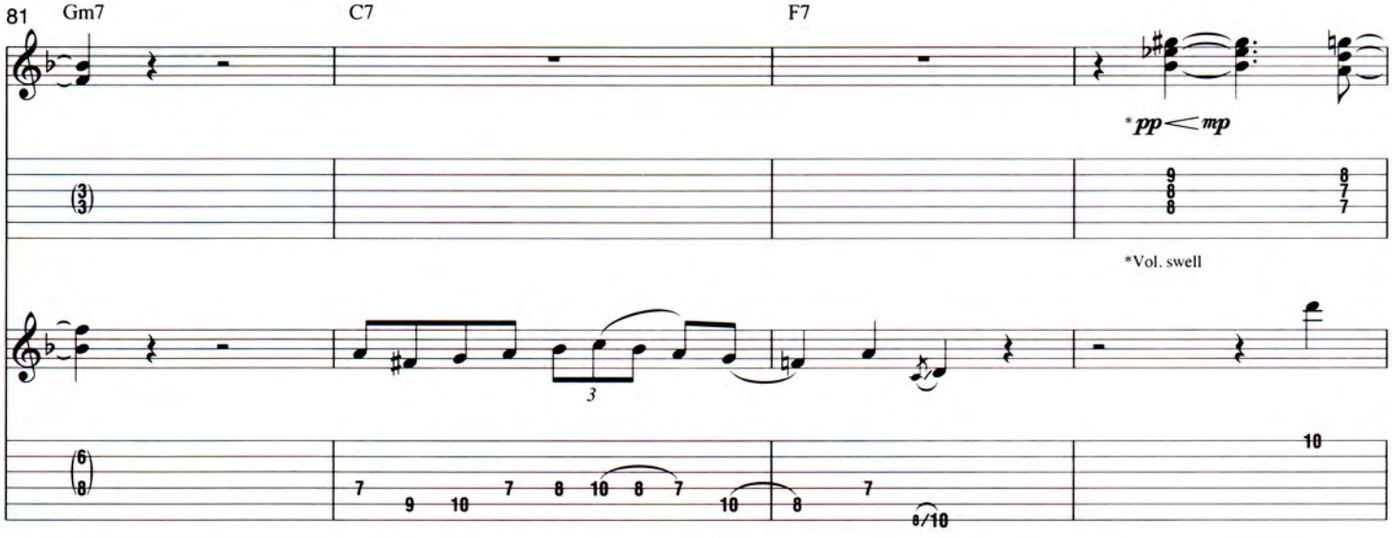
61
B♭7
B°
F7
1/4

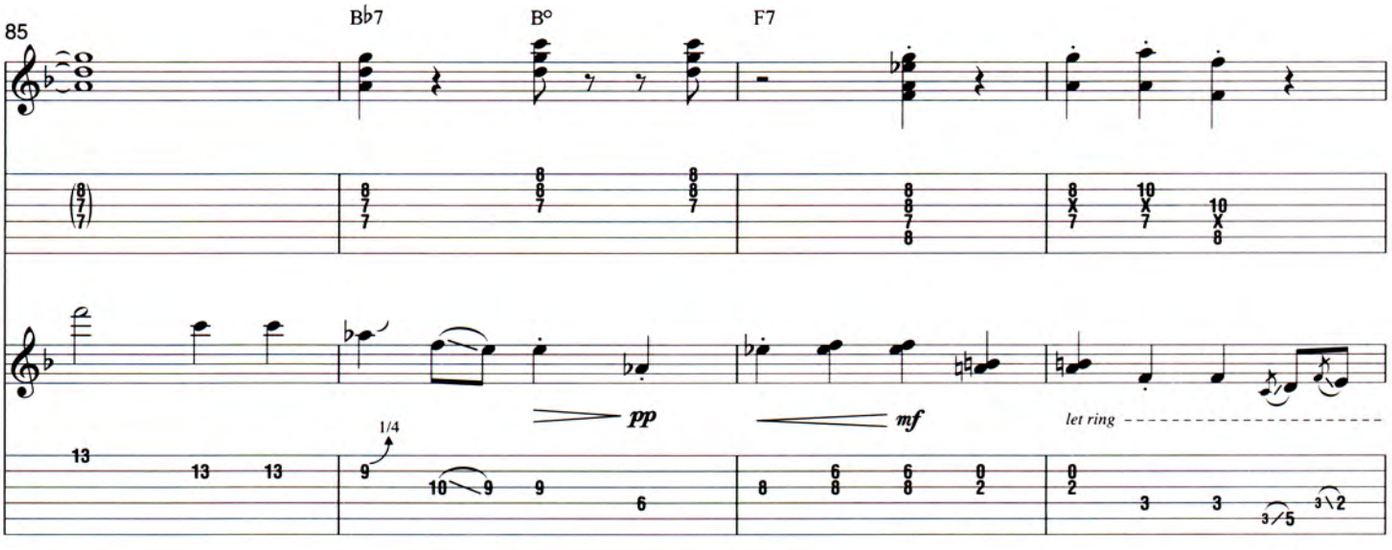
*Vol. swell





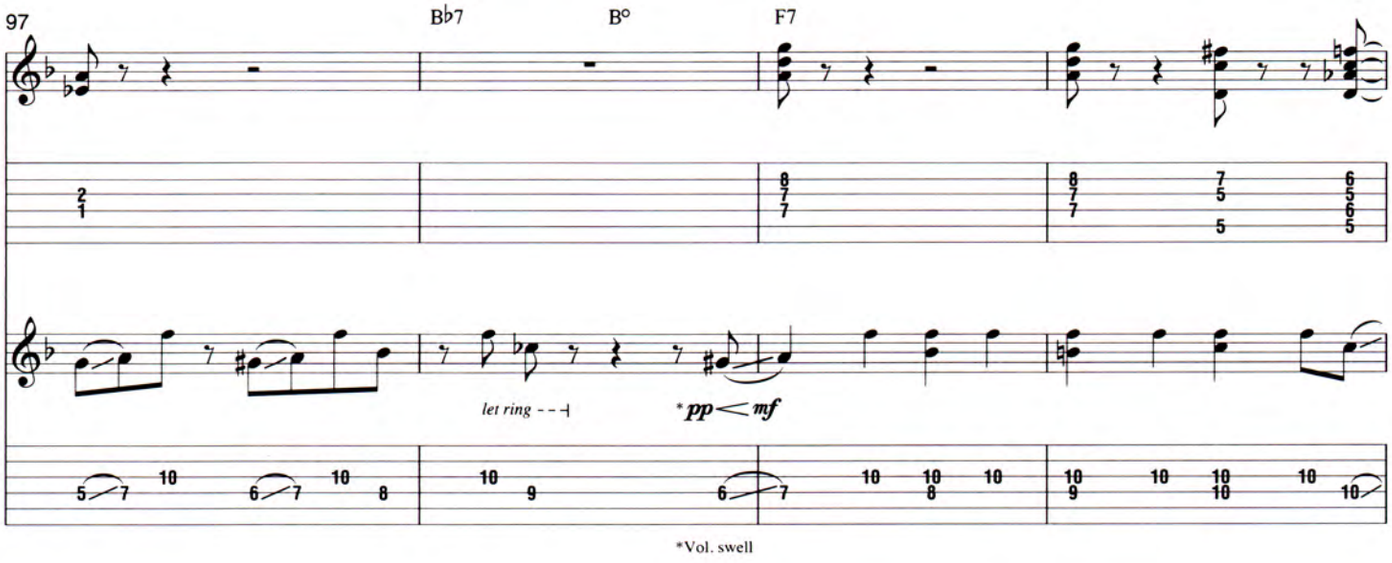

77
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7
*pp < mf
*Vol. swell

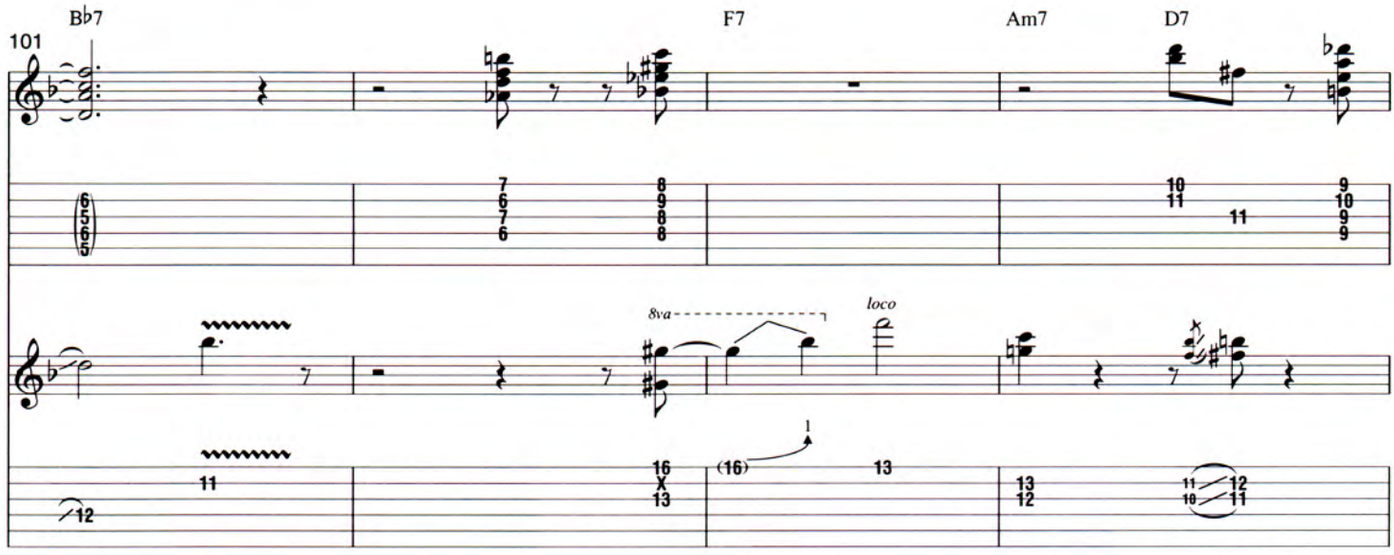

81
Gm7
C7
F7
*pp < mp
*Vol. swell


85
B♭7
B°
F7
pp
mf
let ring
1/4

89
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7
let ring

93
Gm7
C7
F7
*pp < mf
*Vol. swell


97
B♭7
B°
F7
let ring
*pp < mf
*Vol. swell



*Vol. swell

D

Gtr. 2 tacet

*Vol. swell

113
Gtr. 1
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7
117
Gm7
C7
F7
Gtr. 2
*pp < mf
pp < mf
*Vol. swell
121
B♭7
B°
F7
(13)
*pp < mf

B♭7
F7
Am7
D7
125
P.M.

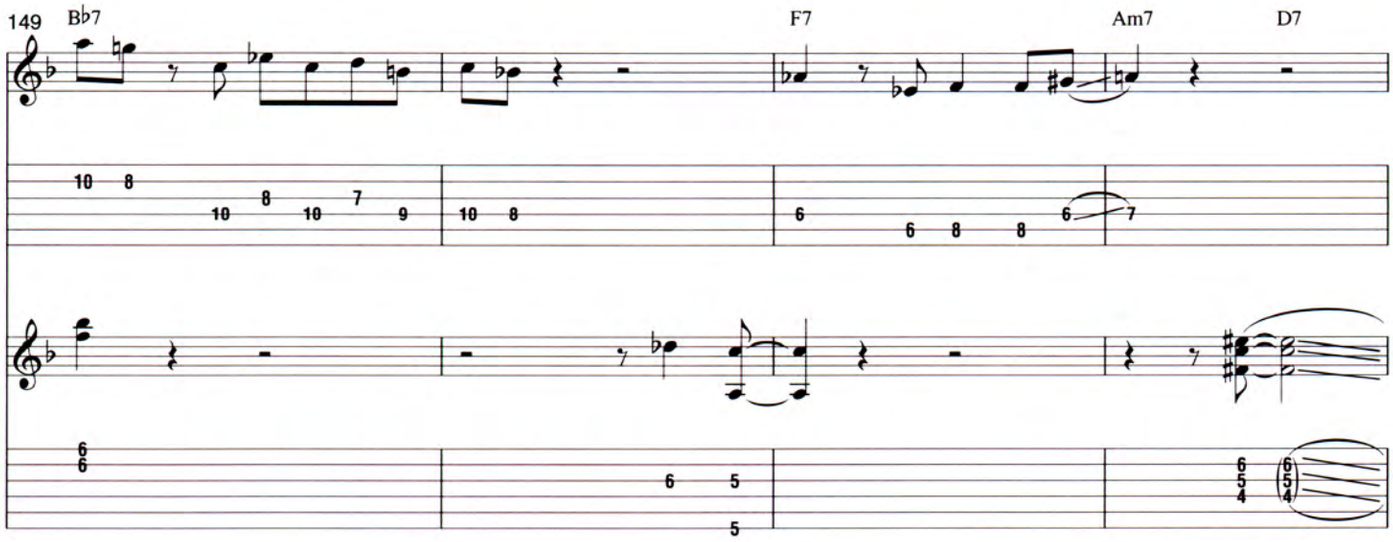
Gm7
C7
F7
129
*pp < mf > pp
*Vol. swell

B♭7
B°
F7
133
< mf

137
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7

141
Gm7
C7
F7

145
B♭7
B°
F7


149
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7

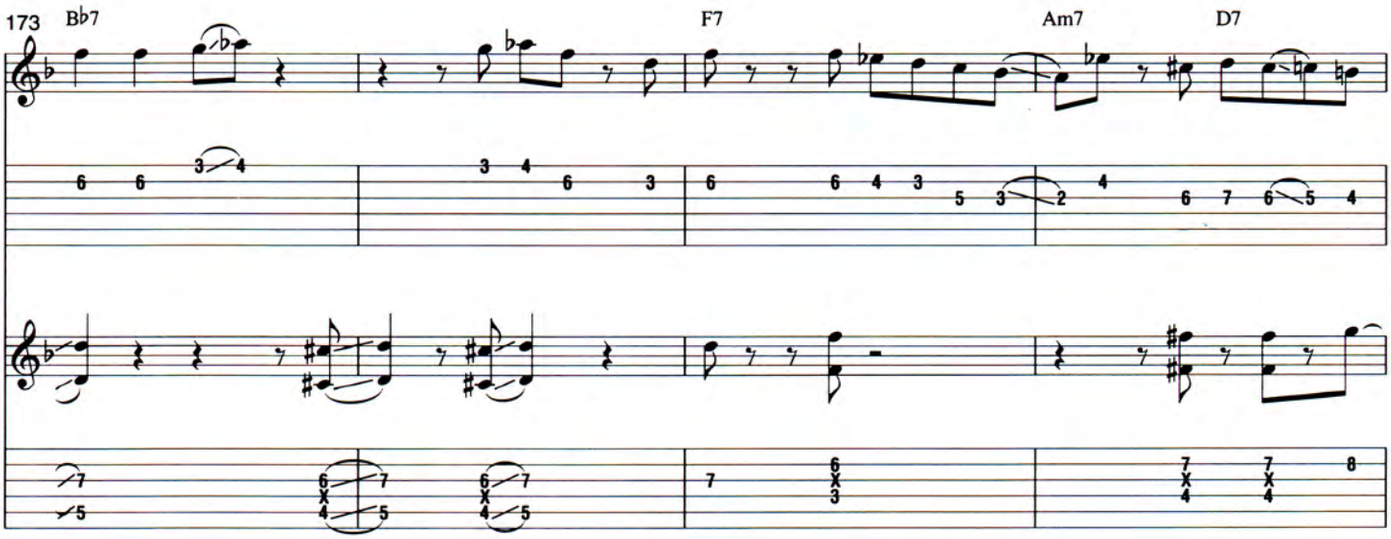
153
Gm7
C7
F7
8va

157
8va
loco
B♭7
B°
F7

B♭7
F7
Am7
D7
161
8va
loco
V
1/4

165
Gm7
C7
F7
pp

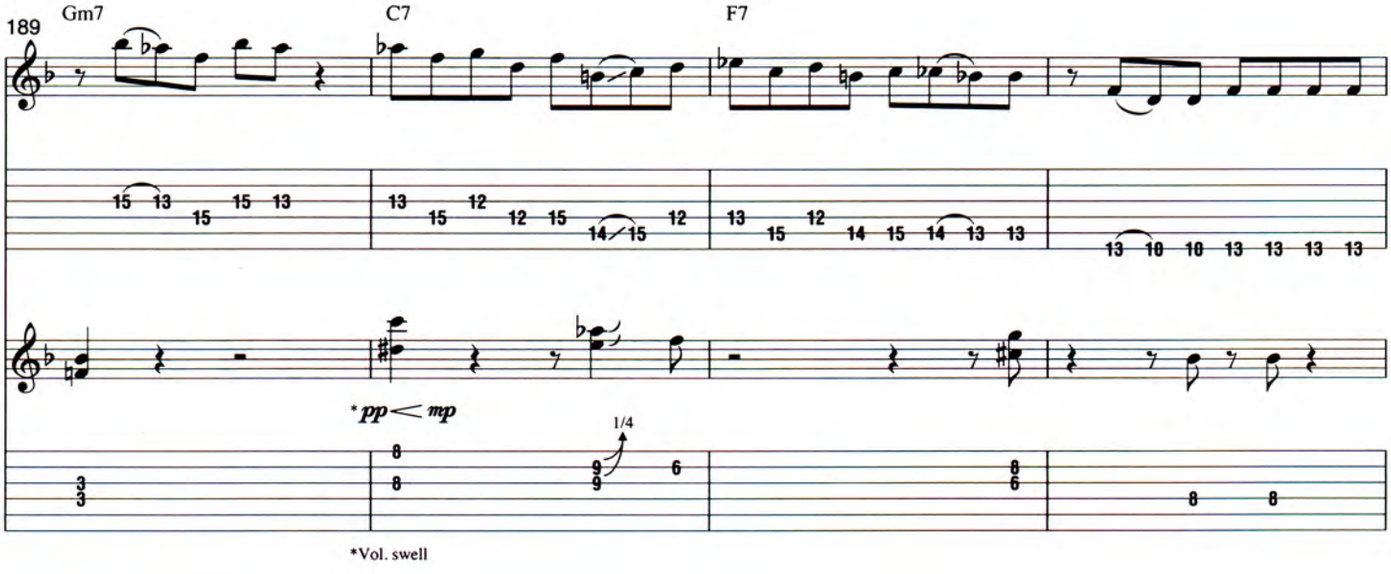
169
B♭7
B°
F7

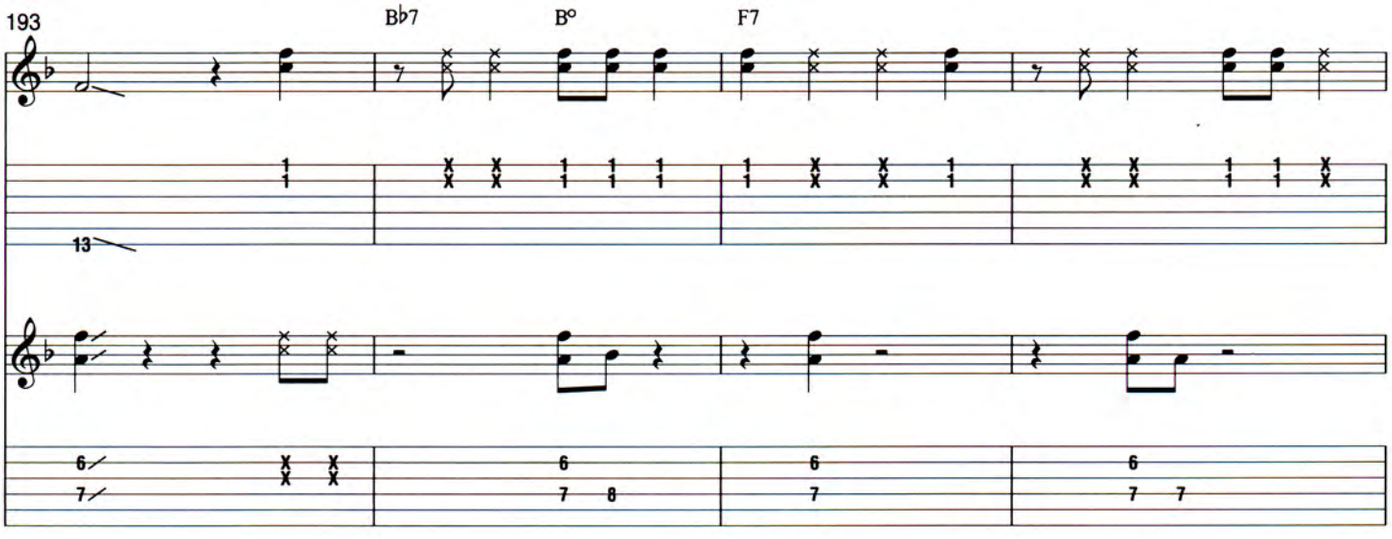

173
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7

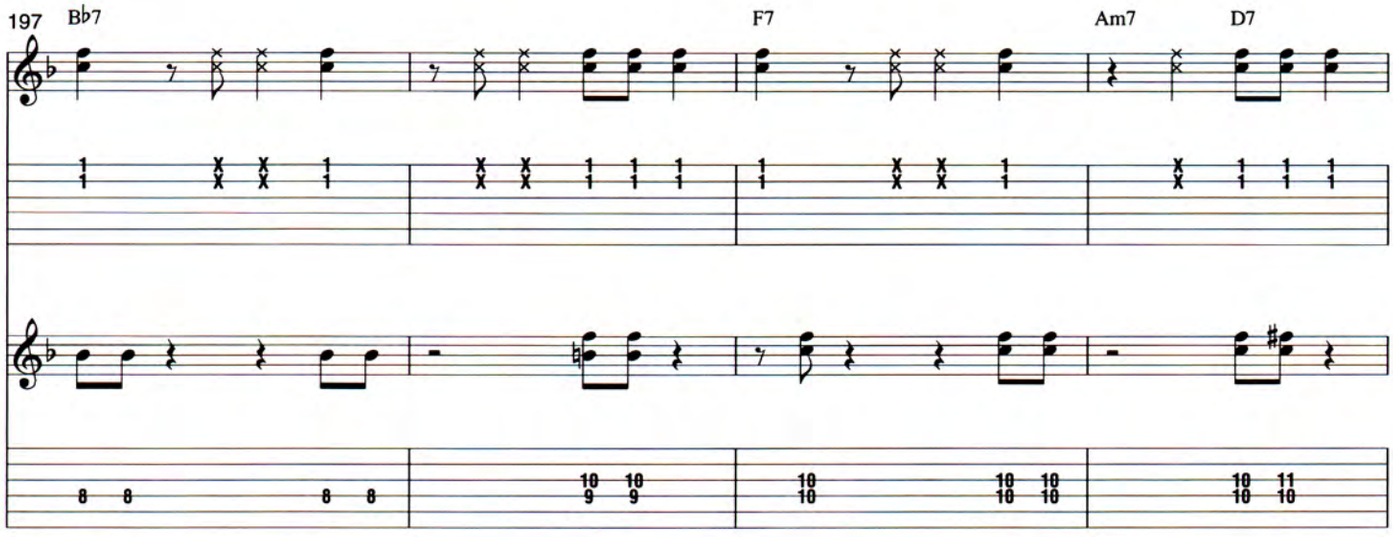
177
Gm7
C7
F7
1/4

181
B♭7
B°
F7
8va
loco
1/4
1/4

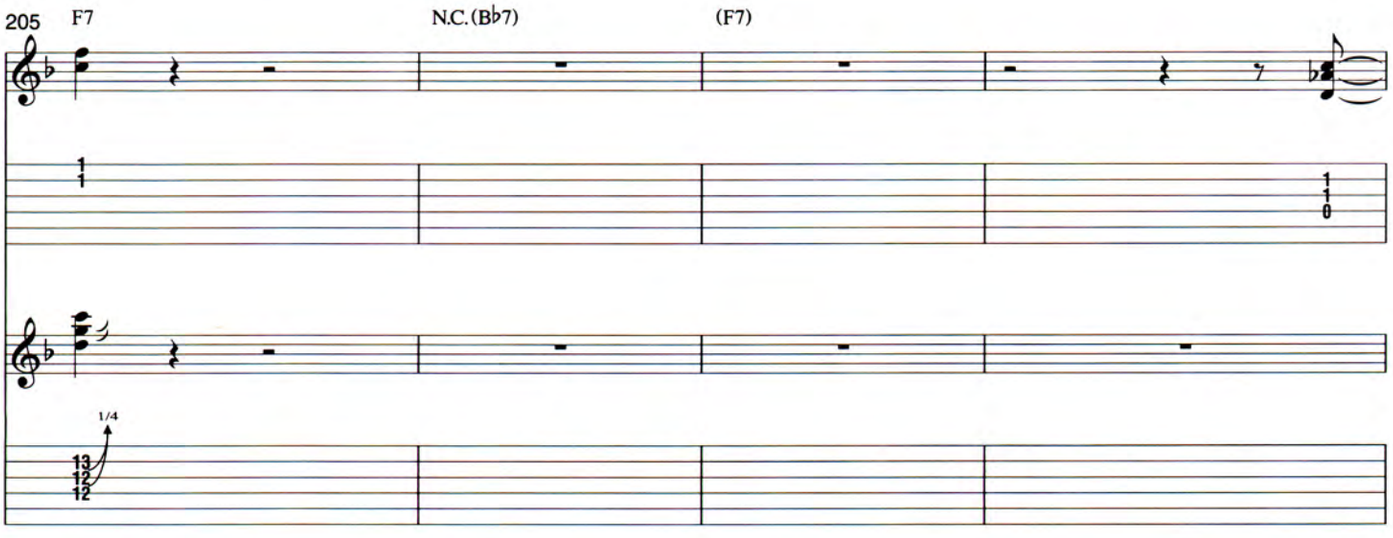
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7
185
8va
loco
1/4
3

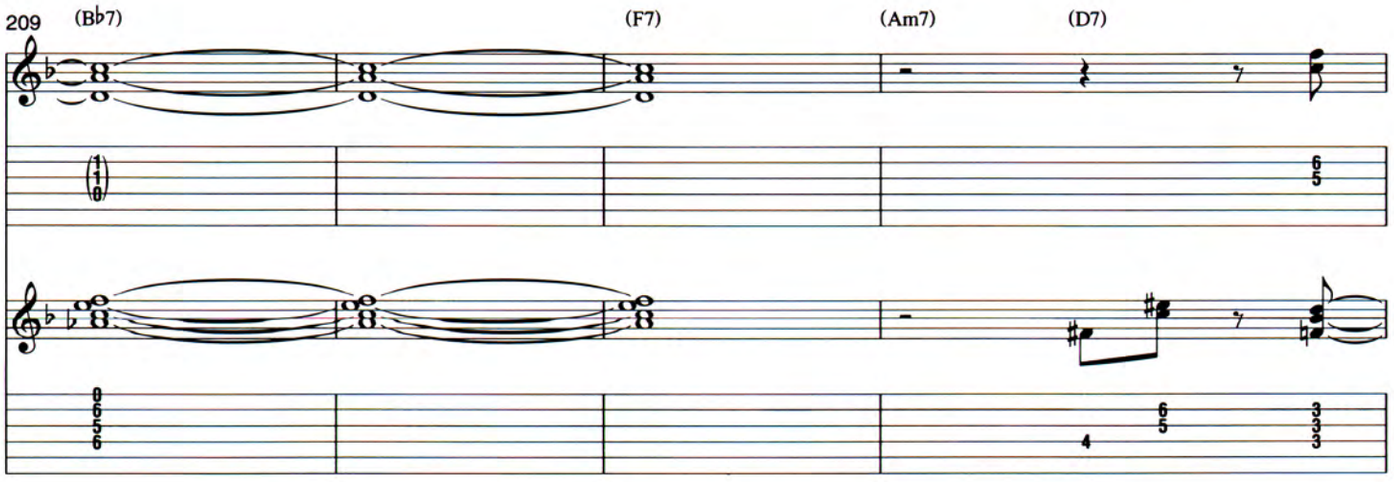

189
Gm7
C7
F7
*pp < mp
1/4
*Vol. swell

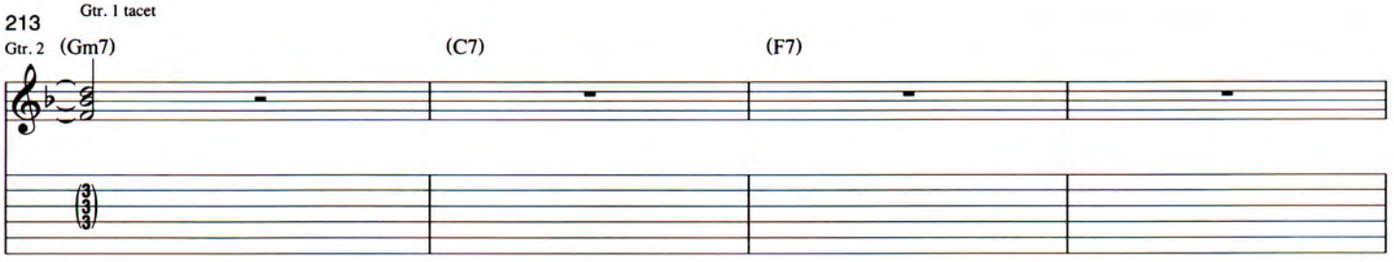

193
B♭7
B°
F7

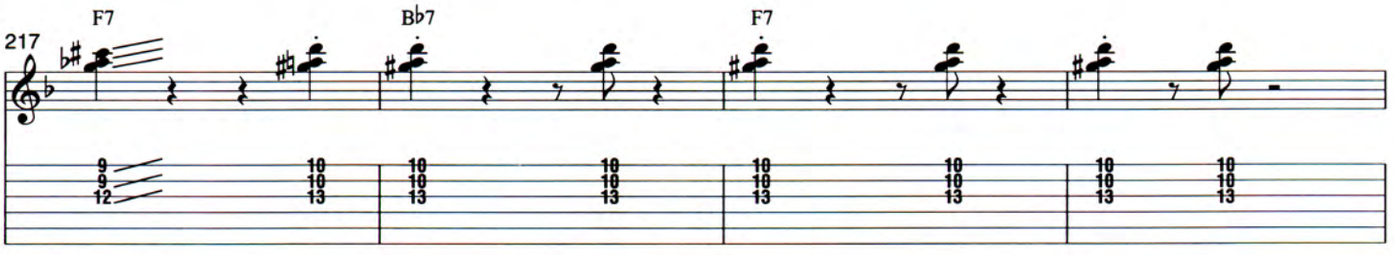


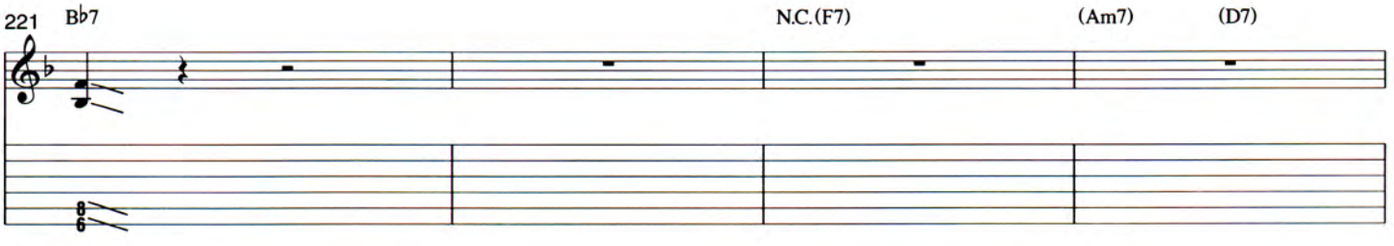
E

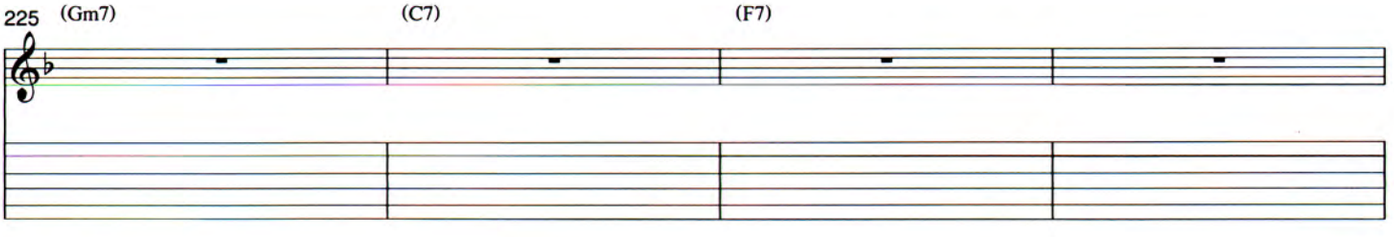


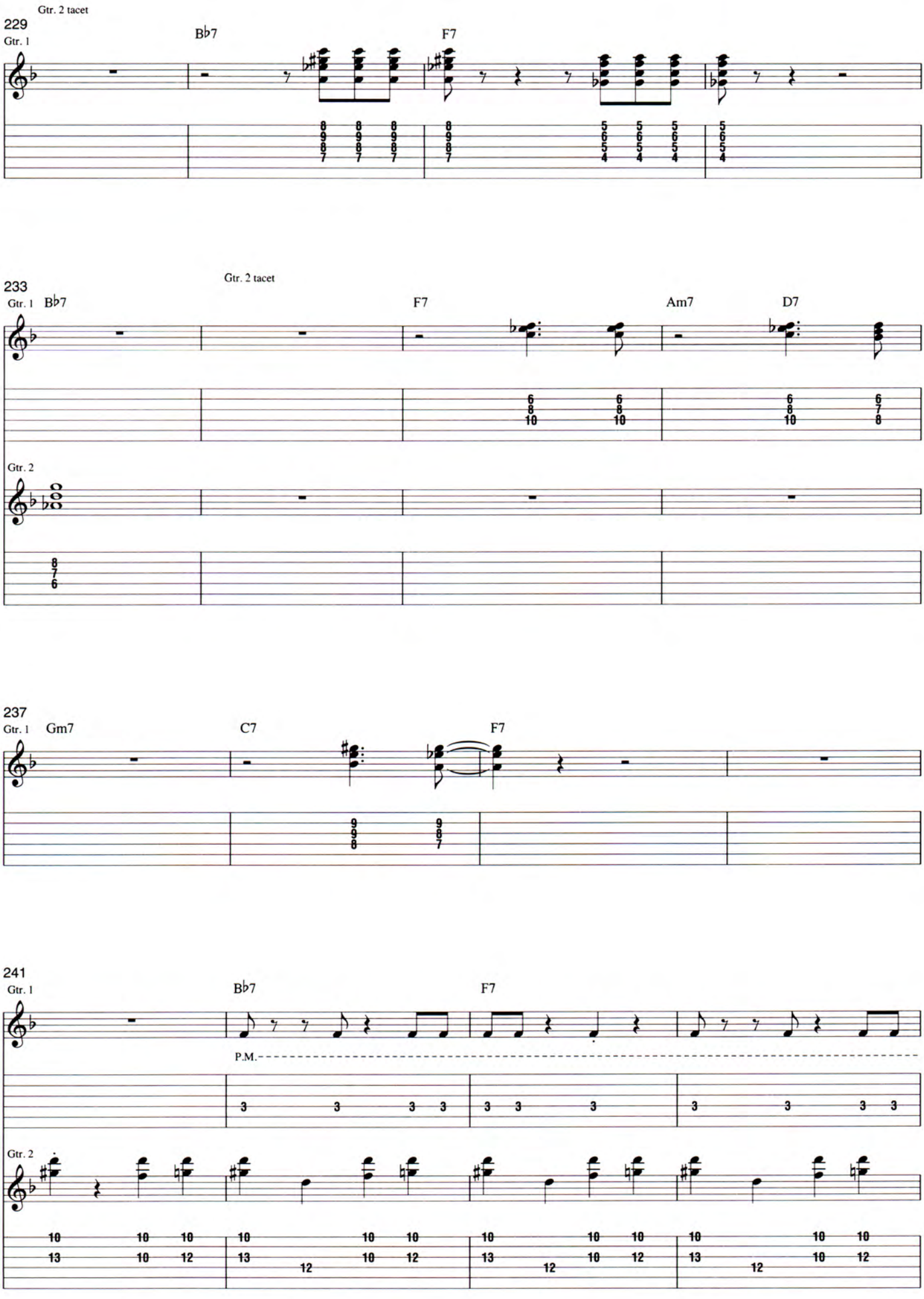

209
(B♭7)
(F7)
(Am7)
(D7)

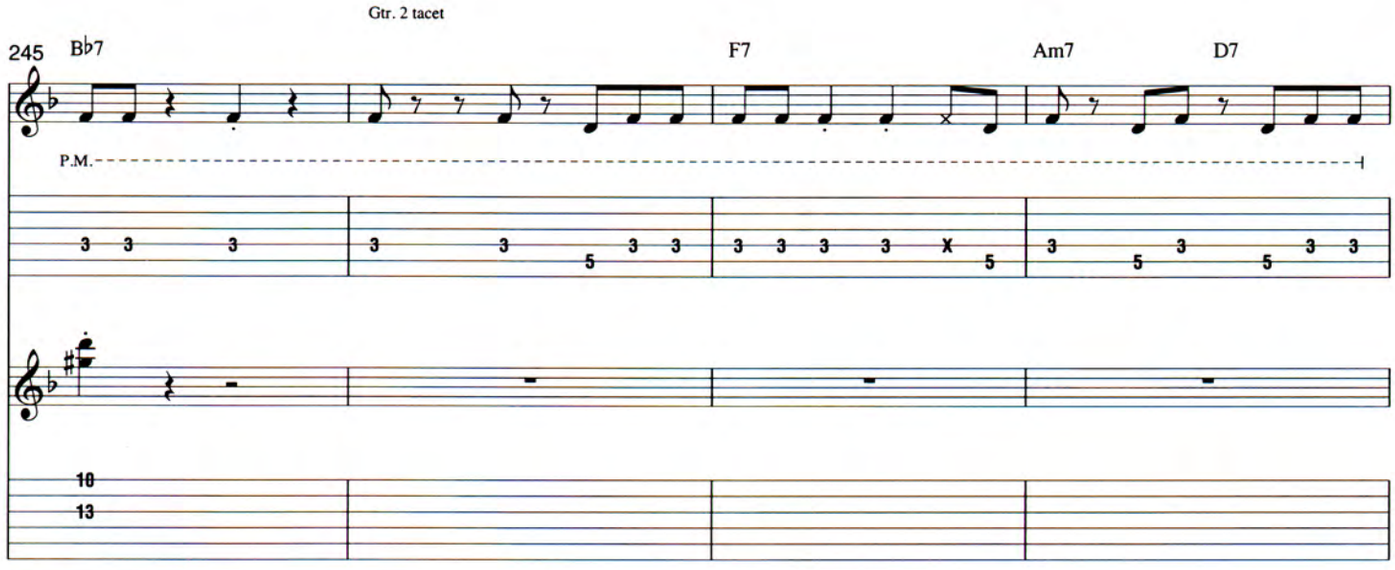

213
Gtr. 1 tacet
Gtr. 2
(Gm7)
(C7)
(F7)


217
F7
B♭7
F7

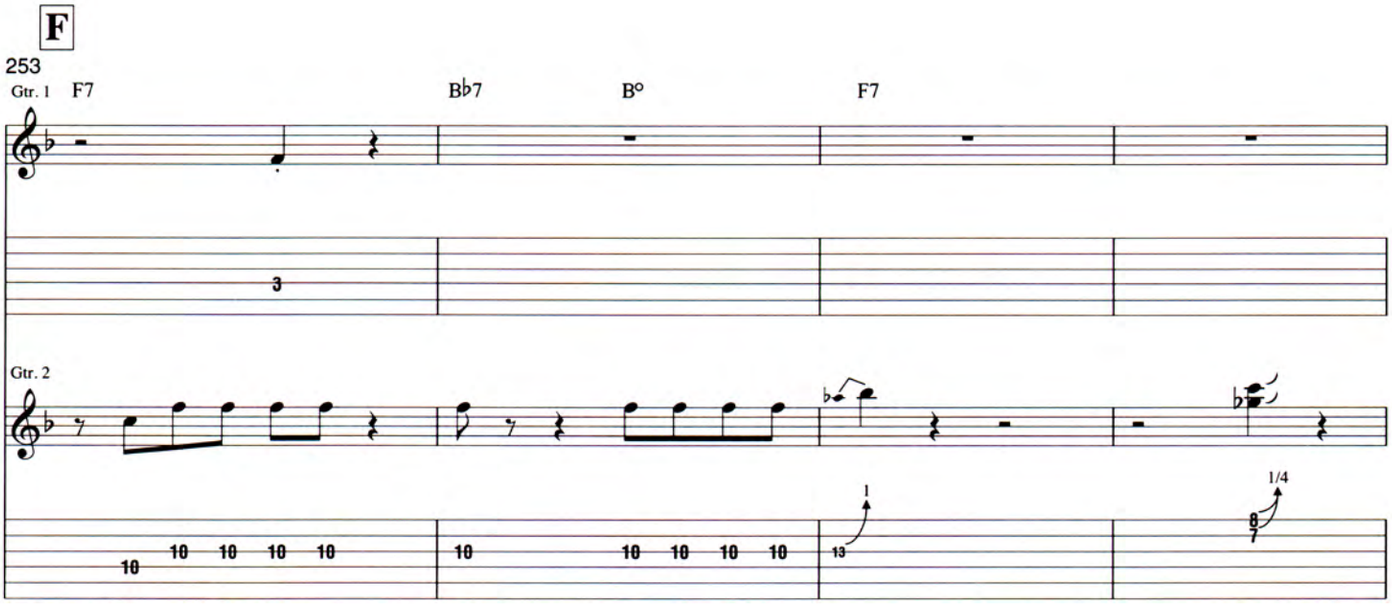

221
B♭7
N.C.(F7)
(Am7)
(D7)

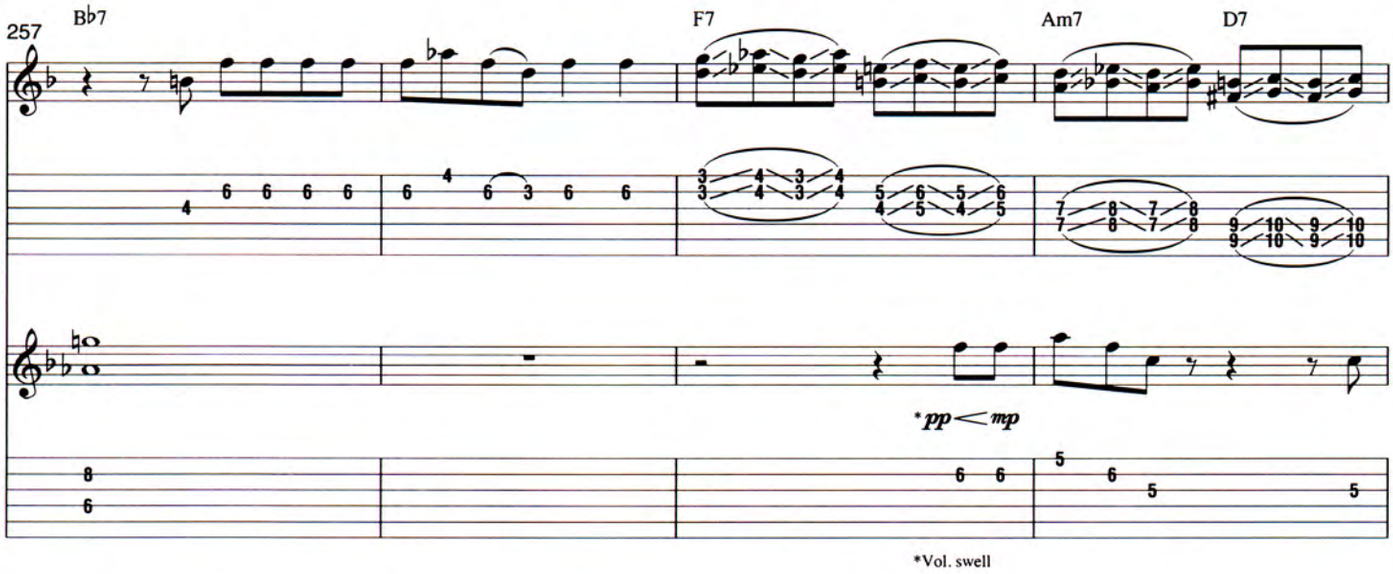

225
(Gm7)
(C7)
(F7)


Gtr. 2 tacet
229
Gtr. 1
B♭7
F7
233
Gtr. 2 tacet
Gtr. 1
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7
Gtr. 2
237
Gtr. 1
Gm7
C7
F7
241
Gtr. 1
B♭7
F7
P.M.
Gtr. 2

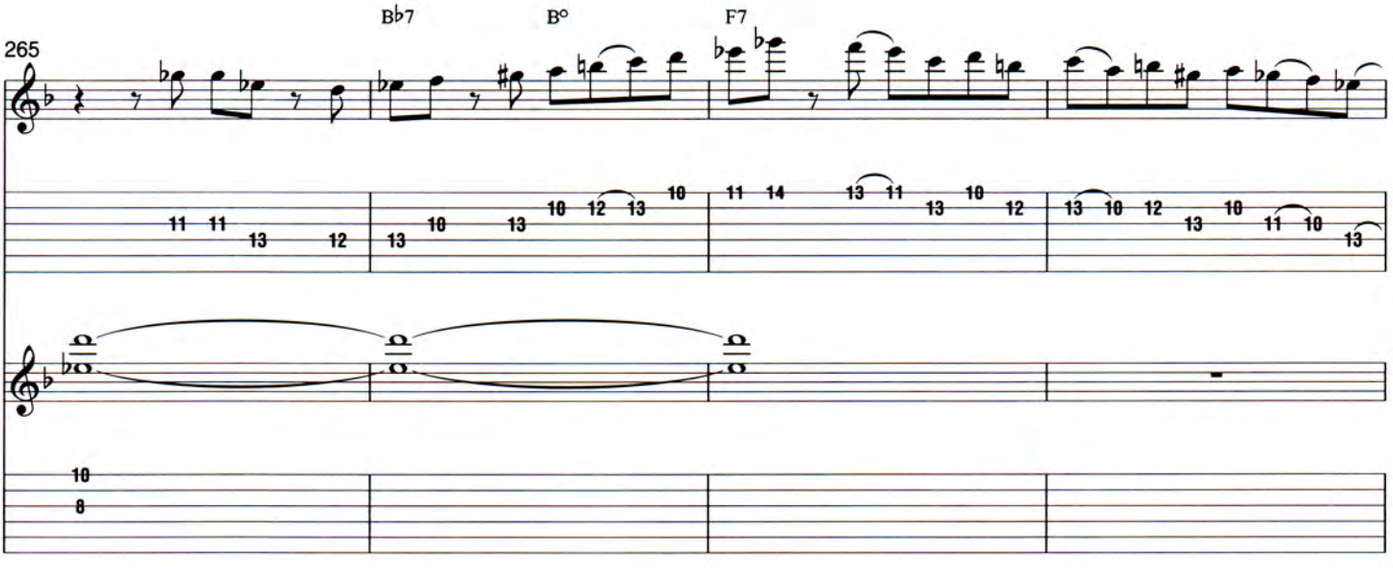

Gtr. 2 tacet
245
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7
P.M.

249
Gtr. 1
Gm7
C7
F7
P.M.

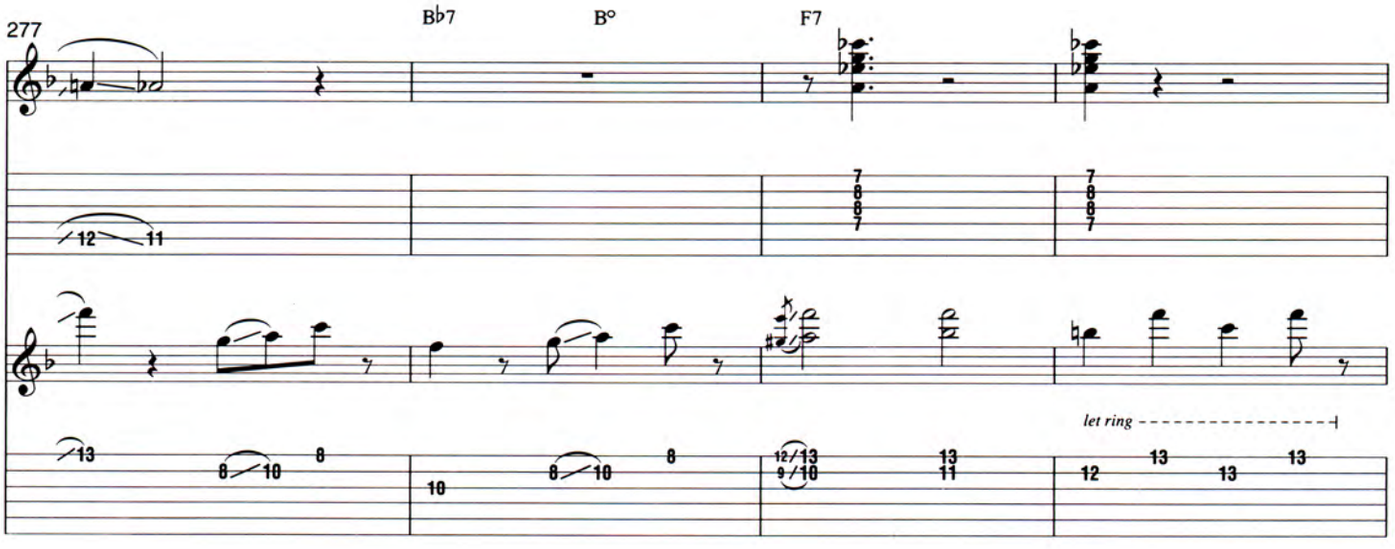

F
253
Gtr. 1
F7
B♭7
B°
F7
Gtr. 2
1/4


257
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7
*pp < mp
*Vol. swell

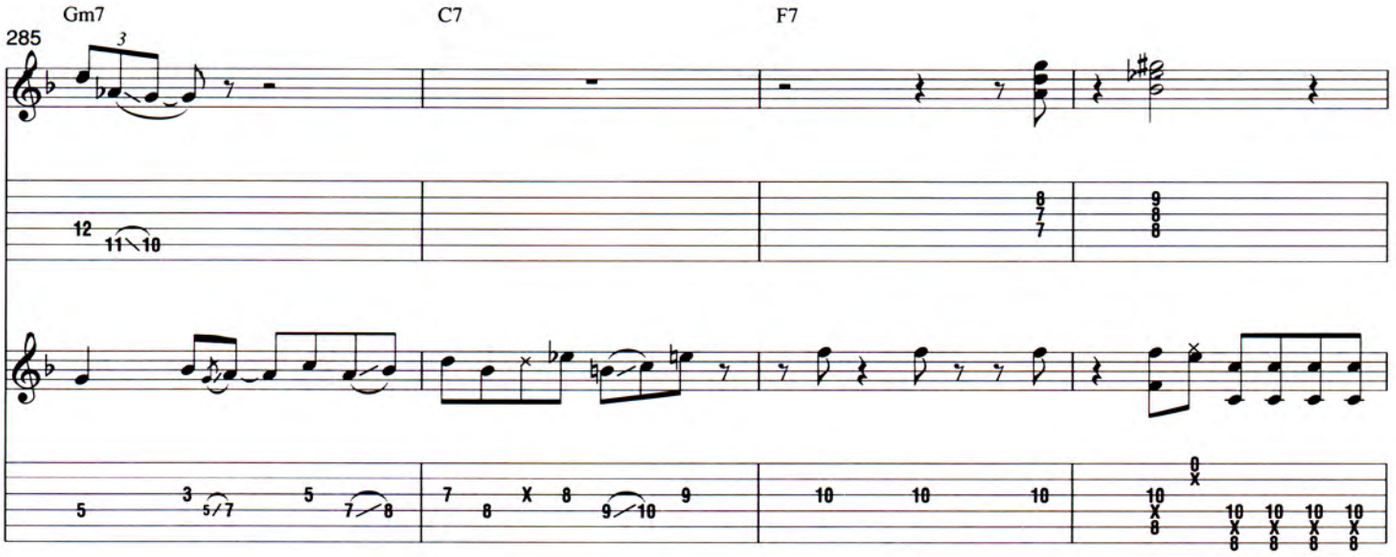
261
Gm7
C7
F7

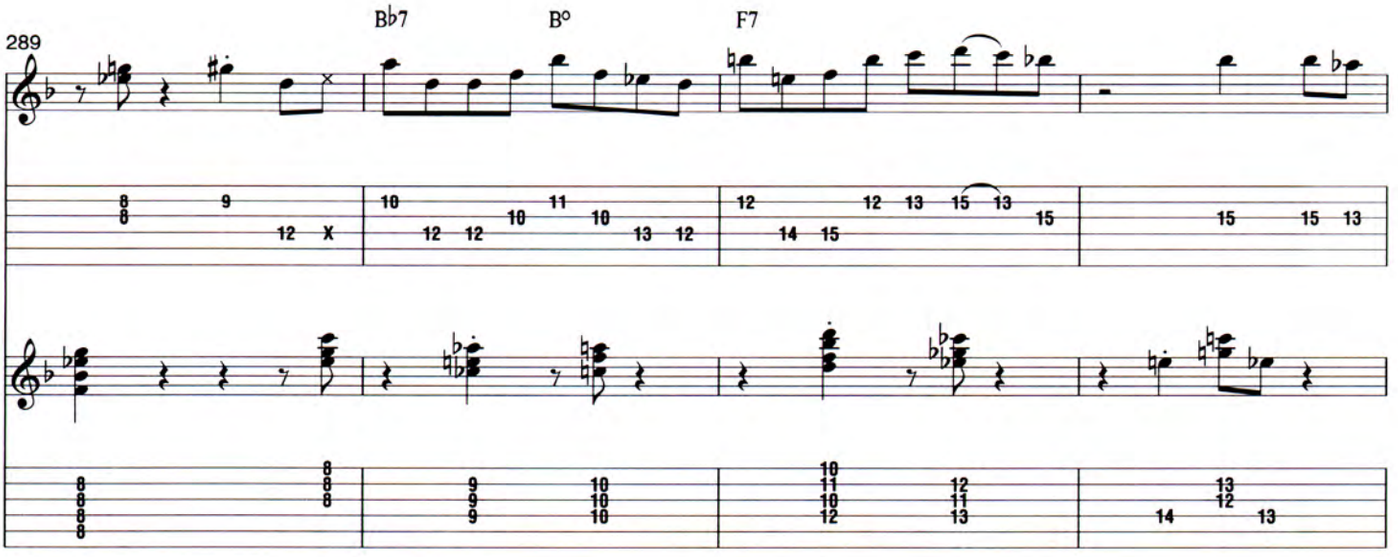

265
B♭7
B°
F7

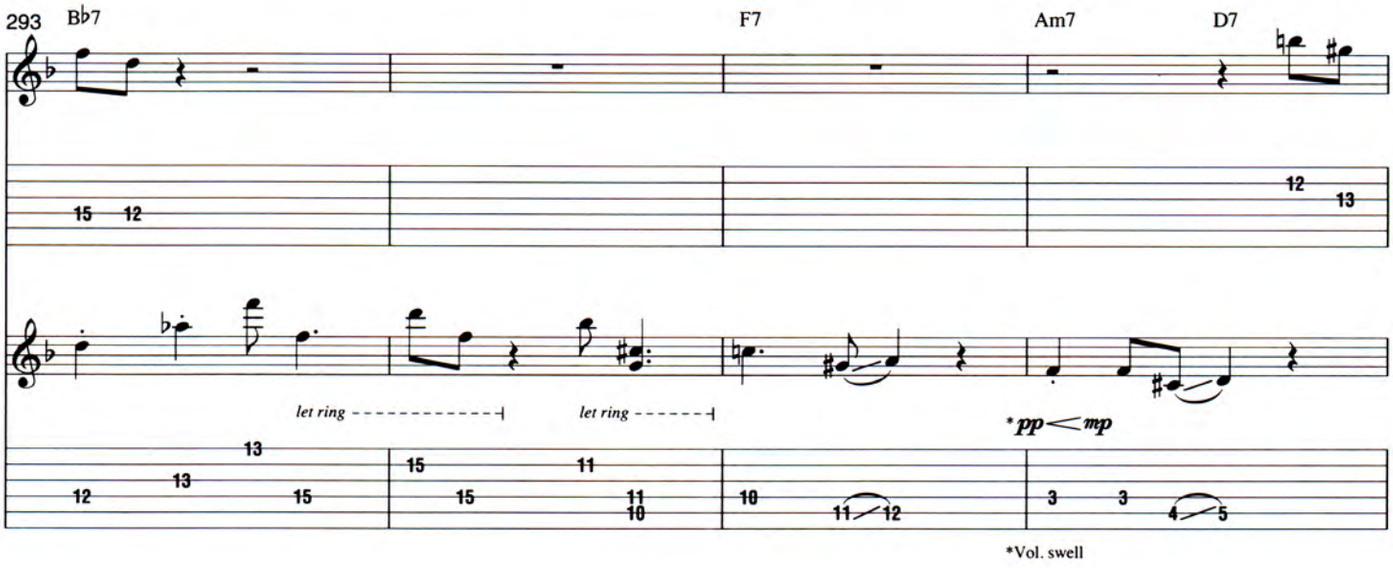
*Vol. swell

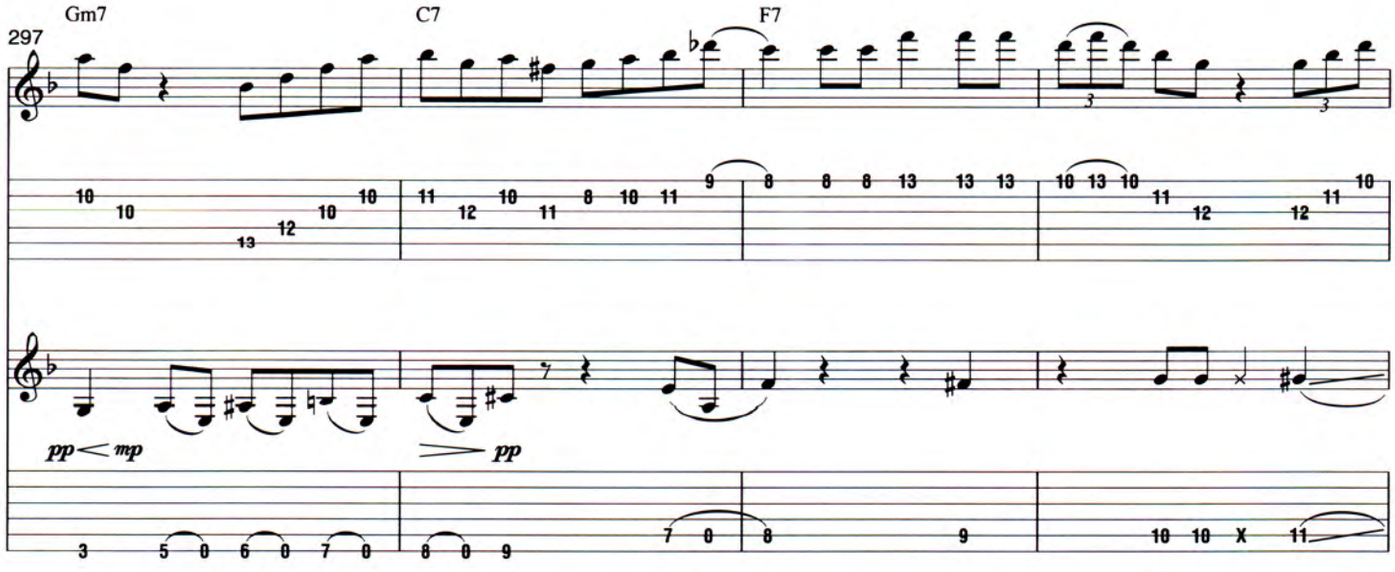


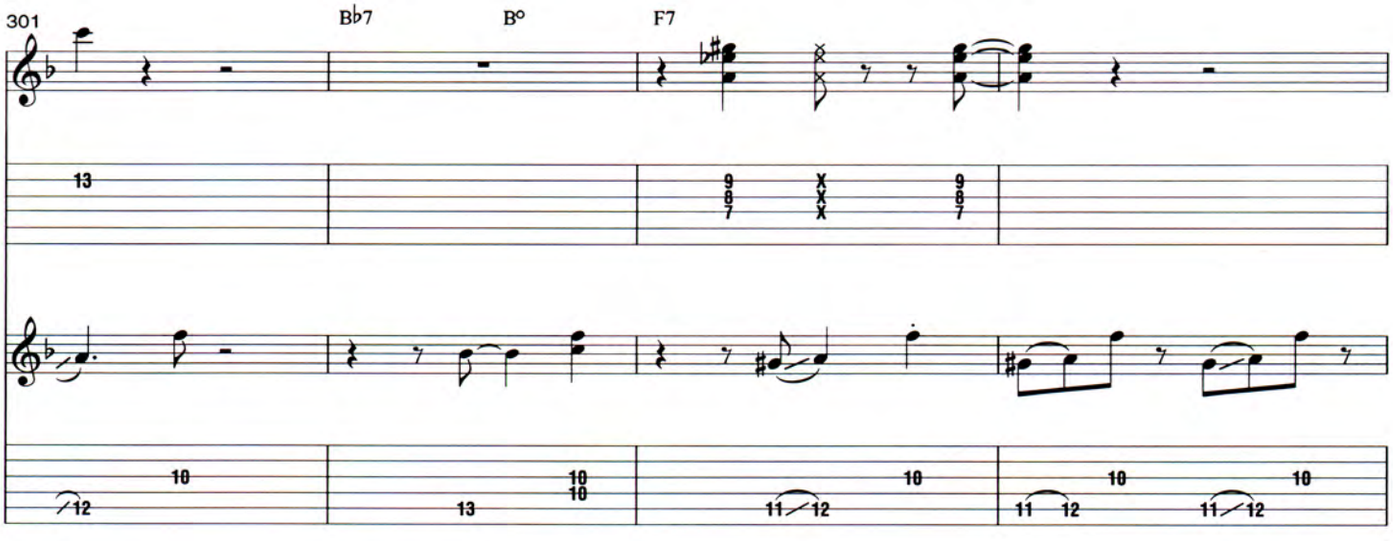
B♭7
8va
loco
F7
Am7
D7
281
1/2
1/2
let ring

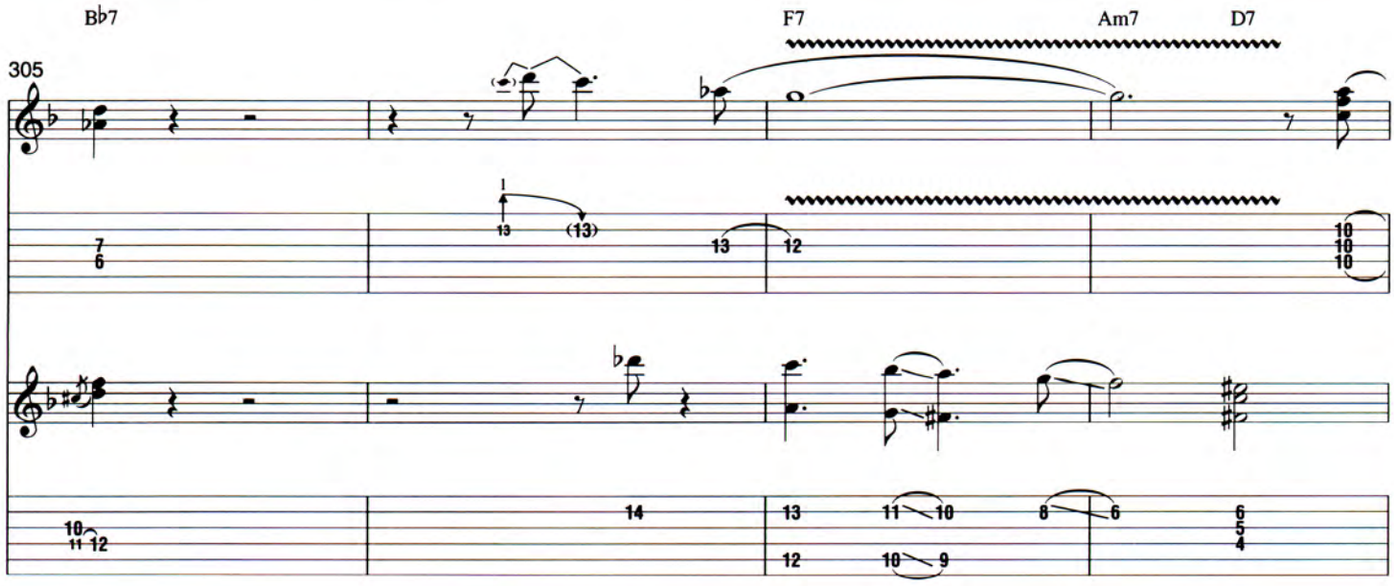

Gm7
C7
F7
285
3


B♭7
B°
F7
289


293
B♭7
F7
Am7
D7
let ring
let ring
*pp < mp
*Vol. swell

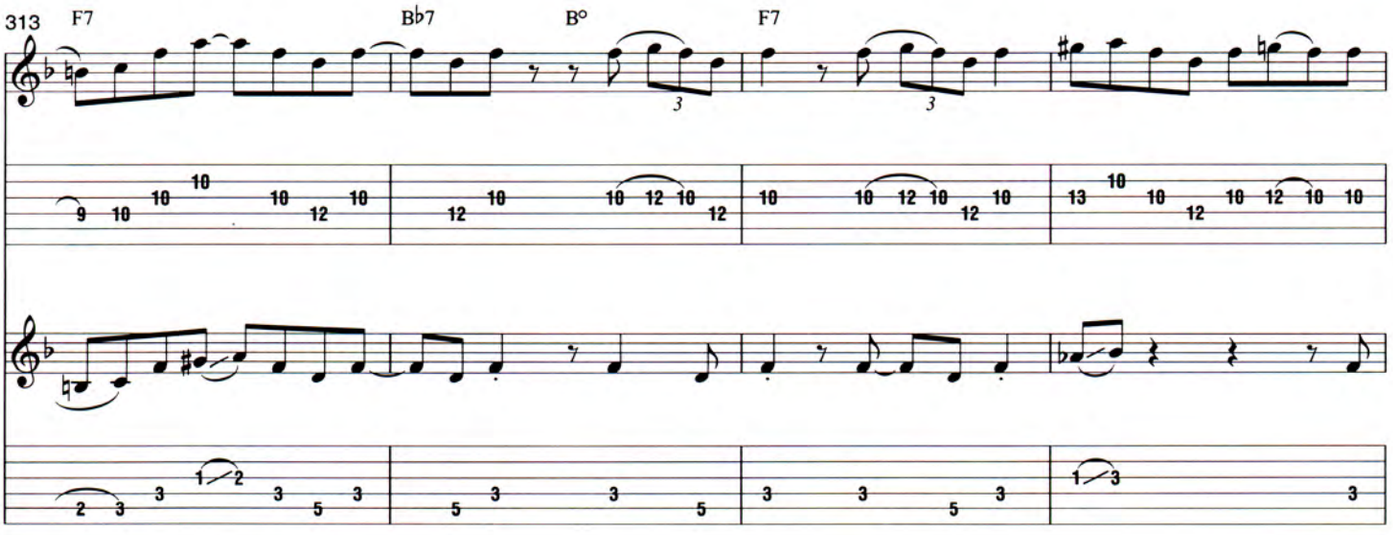

297
Gm7
C7
F7
pp < mp
> pp

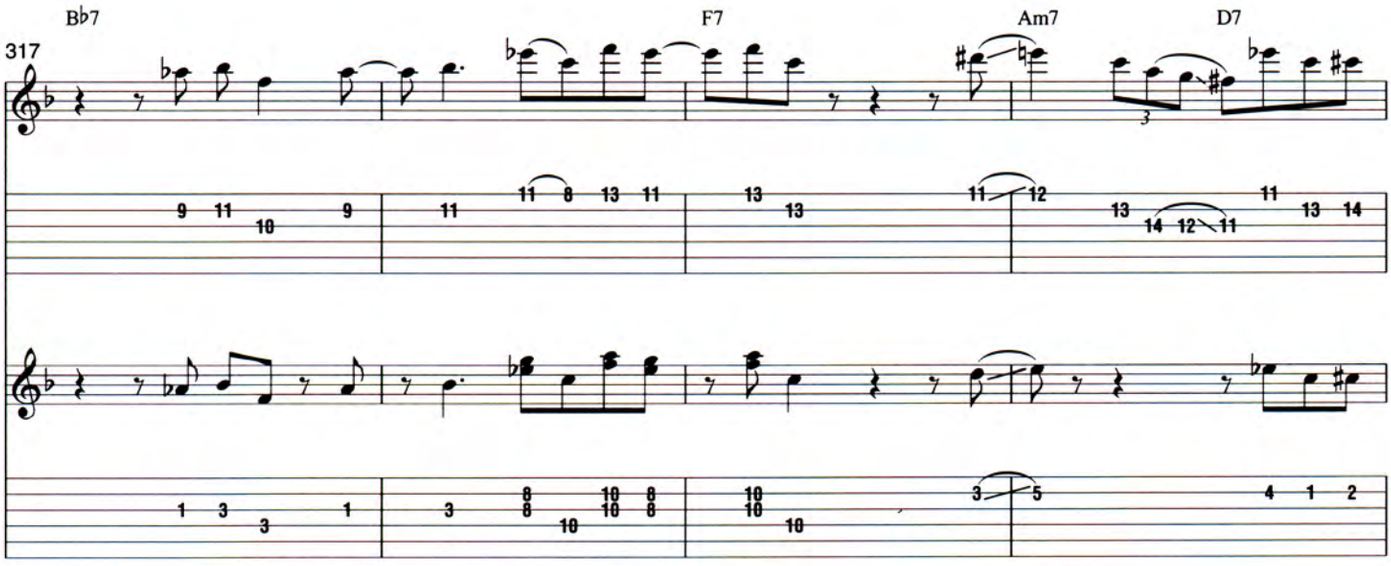

301
B♭7
B°
F7

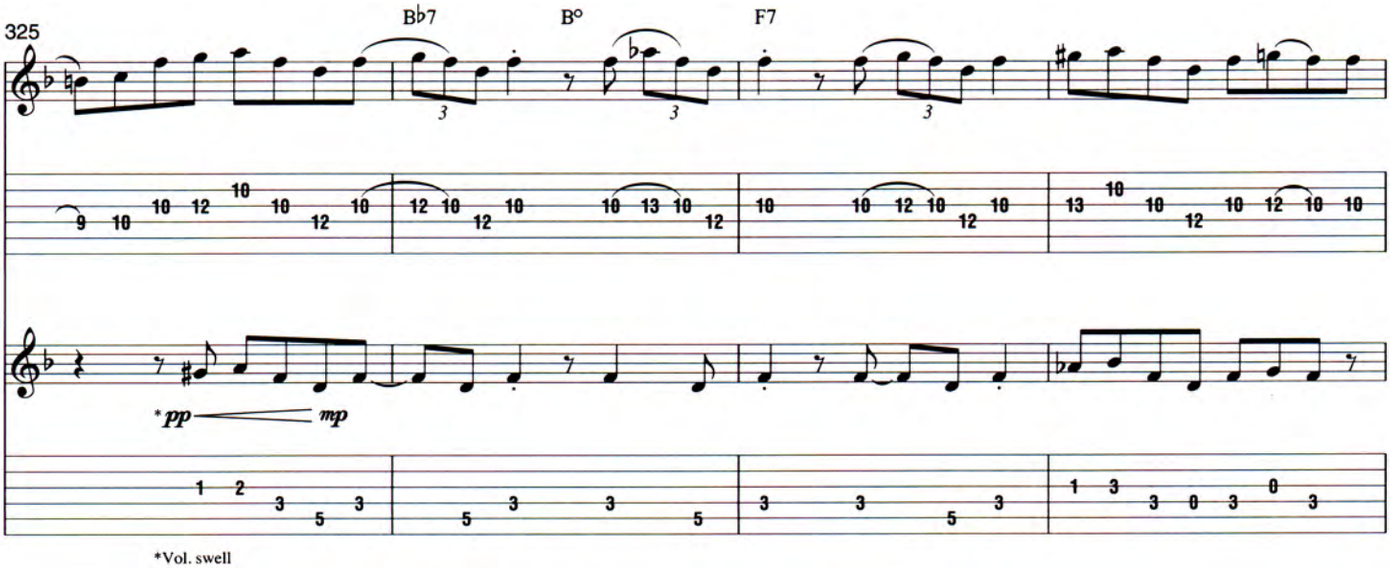


*Vol. swell

G



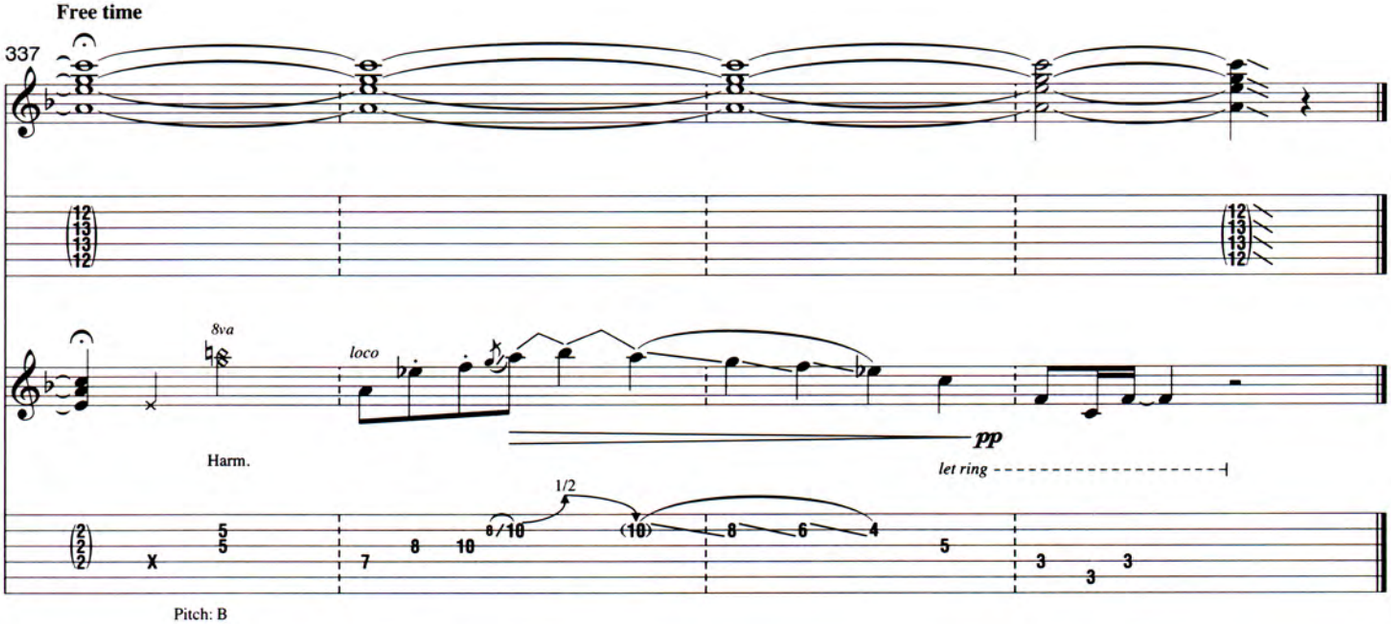




*Vol. swell

B♭7
F7
Am7
D7
329

Gm7
C7
F7
333


Free time
337
8va
loco
pp
let ring
Harm.
1/2
Pitch: B
G

The Brother (For Jimmie and Stevie)

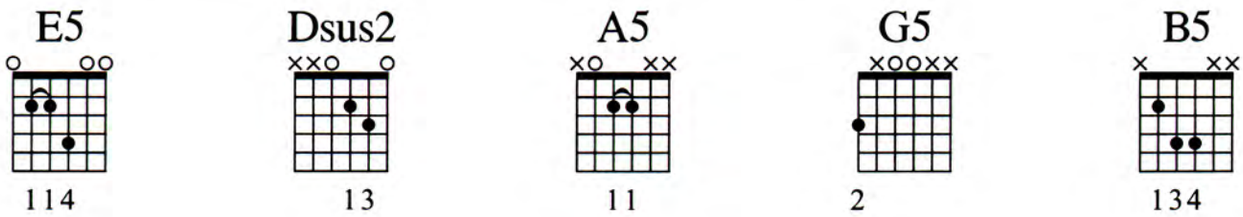
From *Robben Ford & the Blue Line*, 1992

Dedicated to Stevie Ray and Jimmie Vaughan, "The Brother" represents Robben in full blues-rock mode. As the opening track on *Robben Ford & the Blue Line* (1992), it left no doubt that the guitar was front and center in this new trio lineup. Though, stylistically the song doesn't bear much resemblance to Stevie Ray (which is kind of refreshing, actually), Robben's playing here is rock solid and thoroughly embedded in the pocket, and those traits certainly applied to Stevie.

Roscoe Beck, once again, provides the low end, and Tom Brechtlein holds it down on the skins for this album. And though Robben does add support on the record via overdubbed rhythm guitars at times, a look at some live footage from this period leaves no doubt that these three could hold their own just fine. With little more than three or four chords (it does branch out just a tad more during the solo), this song is predominantly about attitude, so be sure to bring yours! For reference, the song transcription begins on page 83.

Section A – Intro

After a single snare hit, the intro kicks off like an updated take on classic rock. Robben plays big-sounding open versions of E5, Dsus2, and A5 chords in a syncopated rhythm, with a mostly clean tone that sounds like a Tele through a semi-cranked Fender. The phrase rounds out with a "turnaround" riff consisting of G5, B5, and E5 voicings, which also borrows from the vocabulary of classic rock.

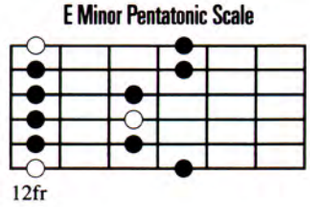


For the G5 chord, fret the low G note on string 6 with your middle finger, allowing the pad to touch and, in turn, deaden the fifth string. If you strum the open B string as well, it won't be terribly troubling, as it's part of the G chord and such a strong note of the key, but try to avoid strumming the high E, as that would sound a little out of place. When moving from the B5 to E5, keep your index finger on fret 2, string 5, flattening it out for the partial barre at fret 2.

In measure 5, the groove is set up for the main theme to follow, and Robben plays it bone-dry here, using only the open low-E string and muted strums to lay it down. The organ, meanwhile, plays a riff that alternates between D5 and E5 (hence, the chord symbols) for a bit of variety.

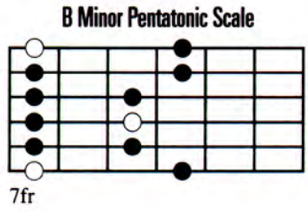
Section B – Main Theme

For the main theme, Robben enters as Gtr. 2, sporting his humbucker/Dumble tone. He's working entirely from the E minor pentatonic box in 12th position at first, which just about every rock guitar player knows after a month of playing:



Notice how he dresses up several of the notes with descending grace-note slides (measure 9), bluesy quarter-step bends (measure 10), and grace-note hammer-ons (measure 10). The 12th-fret bend in measure 10 is not quite a half step, so don't bend too far; just give it a gentle little tug to tease it a bit. In measure 15, Robben plays a quick fill right out of this box form that's executed entirely with the index and ring fingers.

At measure 17, he moves down to seventh position to coincide with the B5 chord, playing a phrase out of the B minor pentatonic box form located there:



But he immediately moves back up to 12th position for the A5 chord that follows in measure 18. For this phrase, slide up to fret 14, string 5 with your middle finger and then use either your ring finger (rolling it up and back) or your ring and pinky for the E and A notes on strings 4 and 3, respectively. The lick in measure 19 is the money lick, and it's not quite as easy as Robben makes it sound. Though it takes place within the E minor pentatonic box (making use of the blue note, B♭, on beat 4), it contains a lot of 4th intervals, which results in an angular, slightly fusion-y sound.

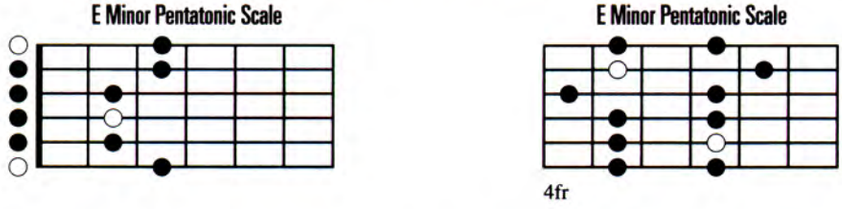
Feel free to experiment with fret-hand fingerings to see what suits you best, but here's what feels best to me: Begin with your ring finger on fret 14, string 3 and middle finger on fret 14, string 4. Hammer from your index (fret 12, string 3) to your middle (fret 14, string 3) and then roll your ring finger for the 15th-fret notes on strings 2–1, landing your index on fret 12, string 1. Pull off with your ring (or pinky) finger (fret 15, string 2) to your index (fret 12, string 2) and then slide on string 3, from fret 15 to fret 14, with your ring finger, pulling off to your index (fret 12) and capping the lick at fret 14, string 4 with your ring finger.

Work this lick up slowly and make sure that you're keeping steady time for all the notes so you don't sound lopsided when it's up to speed. This lick needs to be rhythmically precise, or the song will lose all the momentum you've gained thus far. Below is an exercise that may help you with this 4th-based pentatonic playing. Again, experiment with different fret-hand fingerings to see what feels best to you.

Section C – Restatement of Main Theme

The fellows work through the main theme once more at section C, and Robben plays it fairly verbatim, though he does add a few fills in the holes to keep things interesting. Notice also that the whole-step grace-note slides in measures 27 and 31 have been replaced with half-step ones, accessing the blue ♭5th note, B♭. This is actually a much more common move for Robben, although the two are usually interchangeable. The half-step slide just sounds a little meaner. For the double-stop bend in measure 33, use two fingers—either your middle and ring or your ring and pinky—the way Robben would do it, as this will make the pull-off to the open G string cleaner.

Throughout sections B and C, Robben, as Gtr. 1, supports with E minor pentatonic fills, muted strums, and the occasional E9 voicing fragment (measures 25–26 and 33). For his E minor pentatonic fills, he either works out of the open box form or the (mostly) fifth-position one. Both are shown here:



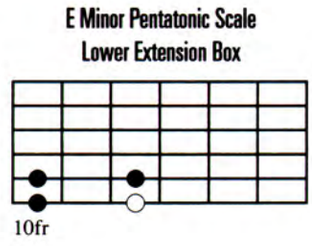
At the end of section C, in measure 40, he plays syncopated E5 and G5 chords as a pickup to section D.

Section D – Bridge

Robben works nearly exclusively out of the E minor pentatonic box form here, really hammering home that descending blue-note slide from B♭ to A on string 3. For the bending lick in measure 44, you can either roll your index finger to access the 12th fret, string 2 or use your middle finger.

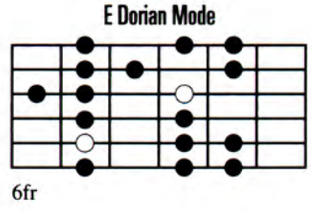
The phrase basically concludes in measure 46 with the sustained tonic E note. At this point, Robben adds a great rhythm riff (Gtr. 1) that sounds very Hendrix-y. It's based out of seventh position and kind of implies a D triad sound over the E root. Robben doubles himself in measure 48 with the lead tone.

At measure 49, the band takes a few measures to groove on the E chord before the arrival of the solo, and Robben fills the space with a few tasty licks from the E blues scale in 12th position. In measure 51, hammer from fret 14 to fret 16 on string 3 with your index and ring fingers, play fret 15 (string 2) with your middle, and then shift down to grab fret 15 (string 3) with your ring finger for the descending slide and pull-off. To wrap it up, we hear one more statement of the main theme's first phrase (measures 53). Here, Robben either doubled himself an octave higher or used an octave pedal to create a full sound. Notice that the ending of the lick is slightly modified, descending to the low E by way of the lower extension box.



Section E – Guitar Solo

For the solo, Robben kicks the door open right away with a searing bend and a high, vibratoed note in the 12th-position E minor pentatonic box. Robben bends with his ring finger here and uses the pinky for the high G note on fret 15, string 1. He moves through a few E Dorian phrase in measures 59–61, initially working out of a (mostly) seventh-position form, shown here:

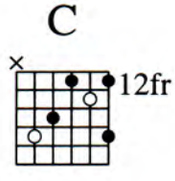


You should probably play the phrase in measure 59 in eighth position though, bending with your ring finger and reaching down with your index to bend fret 7 (measure 60). For measure 62, use your middle and index for frets 8 and 7, respectively, and hammer to and pull off from fret 10 with your pinky.

For the chromatic pick-up phrase that precedes measure 63, start with your ring finger, using your index finger to pull off from fret 3 to the open first string. At that point, you may want to shift down, depending on how you prefer to play in the open E minor pentatonic form.

In measure 67, Robben launches a run in 12th position that ascends straight through the E minor pentatonic scale, but includes the colorful 9th (F♯) at the very end in preparation for the lick that follows. Play this entire bar in 12th position, using your pinky for the high G note on fret 15 and pulling off to your ring finger (fret 14), followed by your pinky on fret 15, string 2.

Without missing a beat, Robben "makes the changes" in measure 68, outlining the C7 (♭VI) chord with a pre-composed lick derived from this C major arpeggio shape in 12th position:

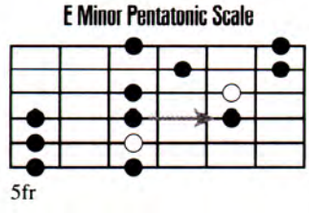


The first part of this phrase should be played with a one-finger-per-fret approach in 12th position, with the possible exception being fret 14, string 3 at the end of beat 2. Though you could roll the ring finger from string 4 to catch this note, Robben would most likely use his pinky here. The end of the phrase is a little tricky, as you'll need to perform two continuous descending slides with your index finger. Work this up slowly at first.

In measure 69, over the D7 chord, shift up to 14th position for the hammer-on from fret 14 to fret 16 (on the "and" of beat 2) and then, after the D note at fret 15, string 2, shift back down immediately to 12th position and slide with your ring finger from fret 14 to fret 16 to fret 14 on string 3.

At measure 71, Robben definitely taps into Stevie's spirit with the high (fret 17), soaring whole-step bends from the E minor pentatonic extension box. At the end of measure 73, catch string 2 beneath your bending finger and pick both strings before releasing the bend. Don't be terribly concerned about the pitch of string 2; in other words, it doesn't have to be bent exactly a whole step, as the effect here is purely texture.

For the ascending run at the end of measure 79, Robben makes use of an extended form of the E minor pentatonic that encompasses fifth and seventh positions. This is a favorite of players like Eric Clapton, who don't use their pinky much when soloing. It looks like this:



To gain familiarity with this form, try the following exercise, paying close attention to the fingering suggestions, as they're the key to moving smoothly between the forms.

The Brother
Example 2

Though you could certainly play it all with the pick, it sounds as though Robben is using hybrid picking in measures 80–81, assigning the pick to the notes on strings 4–3 and the middle (or ring) finger to the ones on string 2. In measure 82, shift down on beat 2 to play the slide on fret 7 (to fret 8 and back) with your ring finger. The ascending phrase in measure 83, which contains notes from the E minor hexatonic scale (E–F♯–G–A–B–D), a favorite of Eric Johnson's, is neatly handled in seventh position with one finger per fret.

After sliding up to fret 12 with the pinky at the beginning of measure 84, move back down to grab fret 10, string 1 with the pinky and then play the half-step pre-bend on fret 10, string 2 with the ring finger. At the end of measure 84, shift down to play the E–D pull-off on string 3 with the ring and index fingers and then shift down once more, to fifth position, at measure 85.

Sections F & G – Restatement of Bridge and Main Theme

After the solo, the band pulls the reins in a bit with the bridge section, which Robben, after freestyling for the solo, plays basically verbatim as compared to the first time. The same can be said for the main theme, which starts at measure 100. He does alter the fills in between a bit, but it's nothing out of the ordinary.

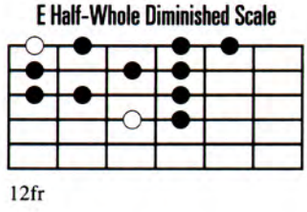
Section H – Outro

After the restatement of the theme, the band just vamps on E and lets Robben play out the fade. For the most part, he plays it pretty cool here, mostly relying on the E minor pentatonic and/or blues scales in forms that we've already covered here (although sometimes in different octaves, as is the case in measures 115 and 134–135). There are a few exceptional spots, though, so let's take a look at those.

Measures 129–130: At the end of measure 129, Robben peels off a nice phrase that's a bit outside-sounding due to the inclusion of the major 7th tone (D♯/E♭). Start in sixth position, with your pinky on the E note at fret 9, string 3. Remain there until the end of beat 1 of measure 130, where you'll shift up to pull off to your index finger at fret 7, string 4 and slide down to fret 6.

Measures 131–132: This blistering lick is another hexatonic phrase. It begins in 14th position and looks a lot like a B minor pentatonic scale. Shift to 15th position for string 2, sliding down from fret 15 to fret 14 at the end of the measure.

Measures 141–142: Though quite scary sounding, the phrase that bridges measures 141 and 142 can actually be comfortably handled entirely in 12th position and is derived from the E half-whole diminished form shown here:

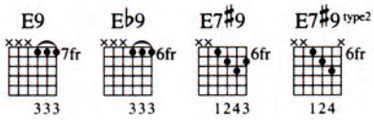


Measures 143–144: Similar to measure 73, bend fret 15, string 1 with your ring finger, snagging string 2 with it as well. Again, the exact pitches aren't terribly important here.

THE BROTHER (FOR JIMMIE AND STEVIE)

The Brother
Full Song

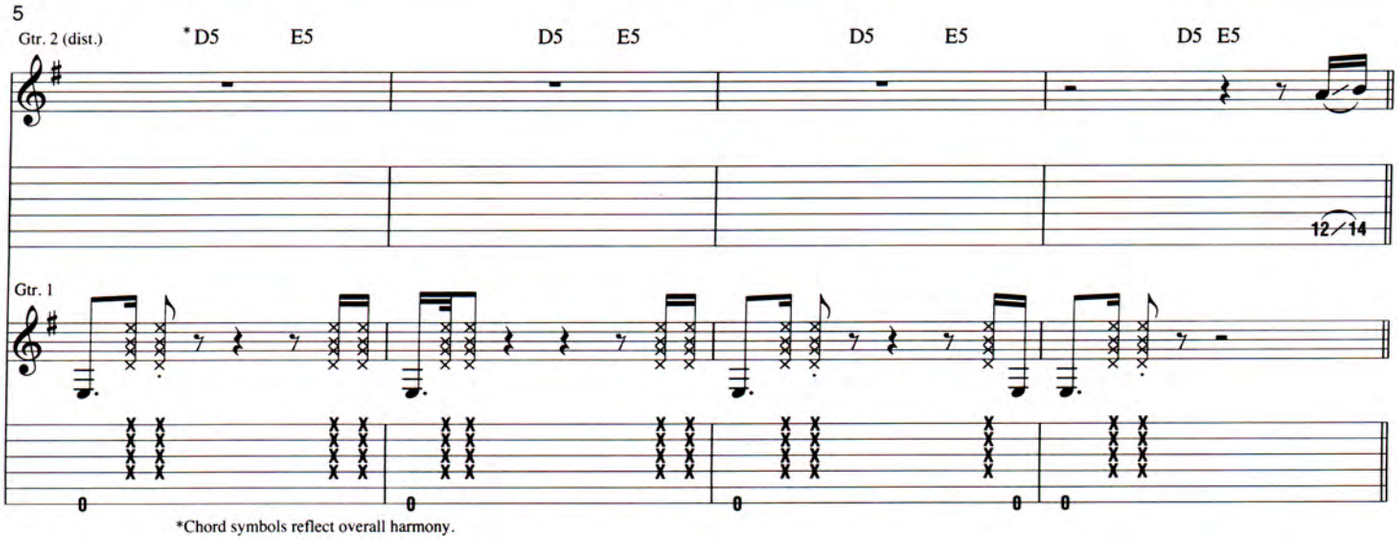
By Robben Ford



Tune down 1/2 step:
(low to high) E♭–A♭–D♭–G♭–B♭–E♭

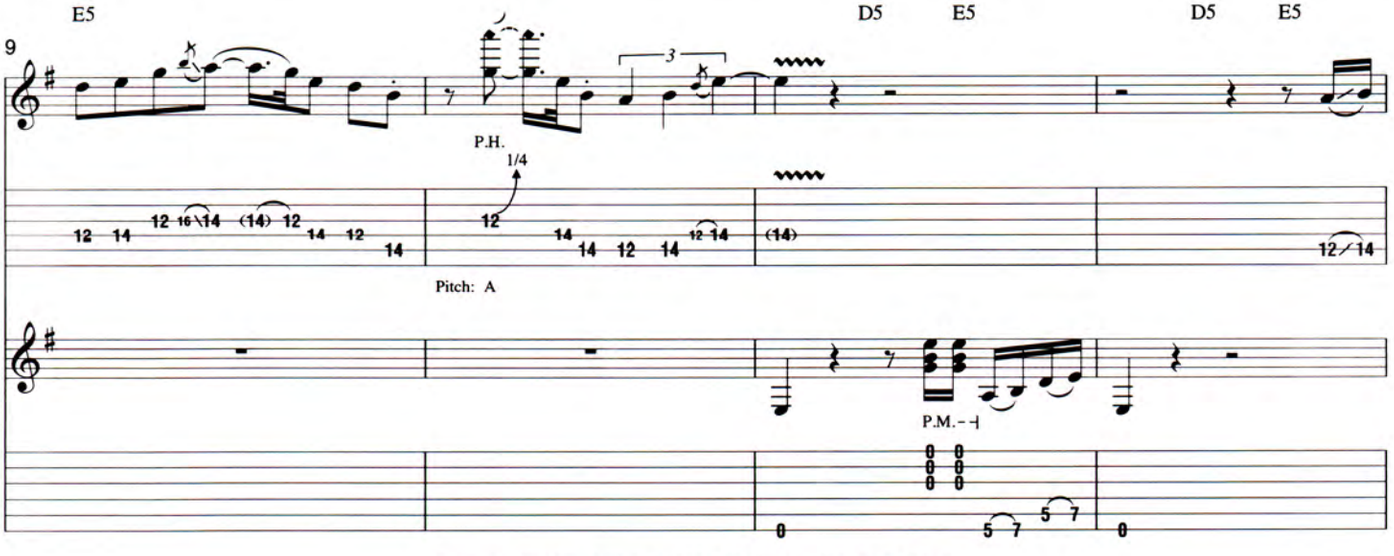
A

Moderately ♩ = 122



*Chord symbols reflect overall harmony.

B



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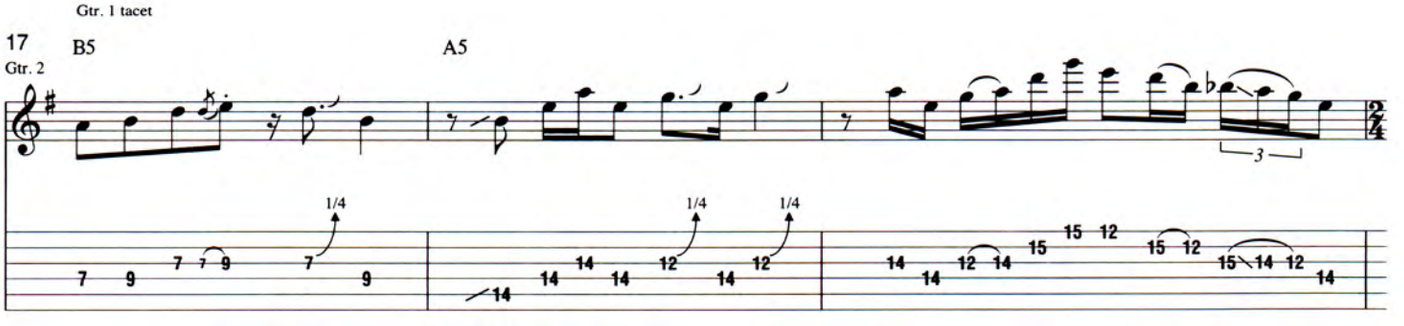
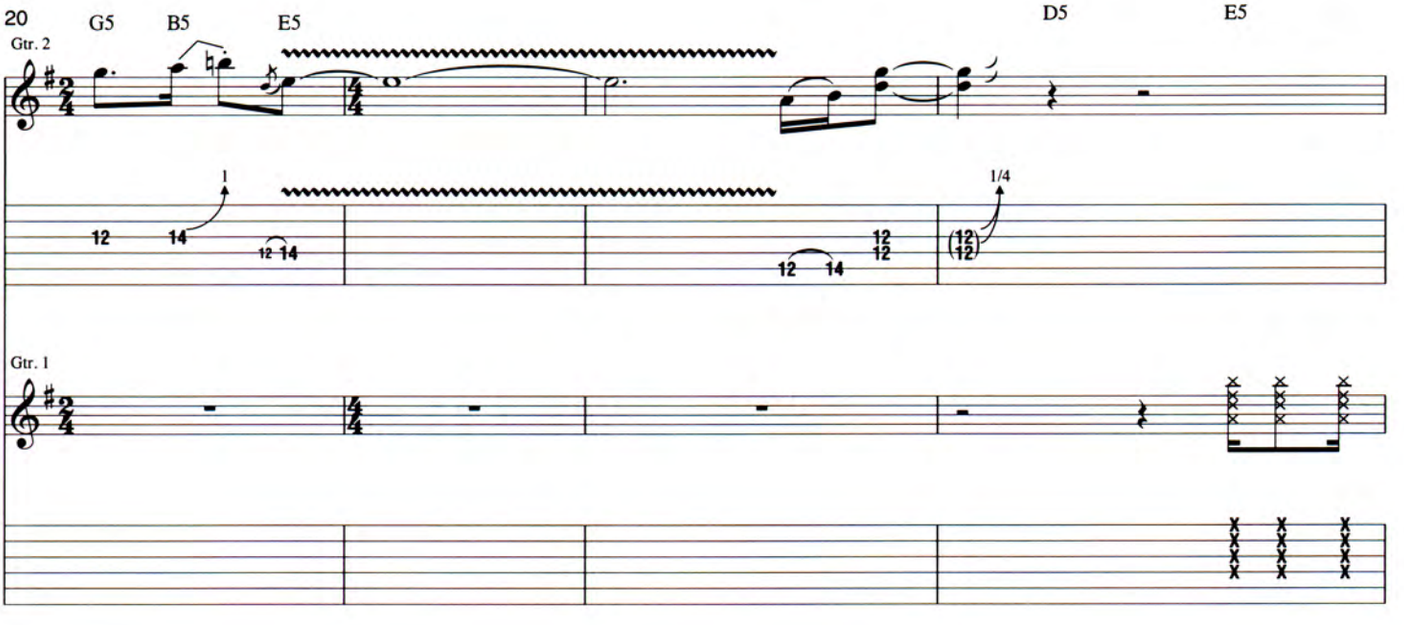
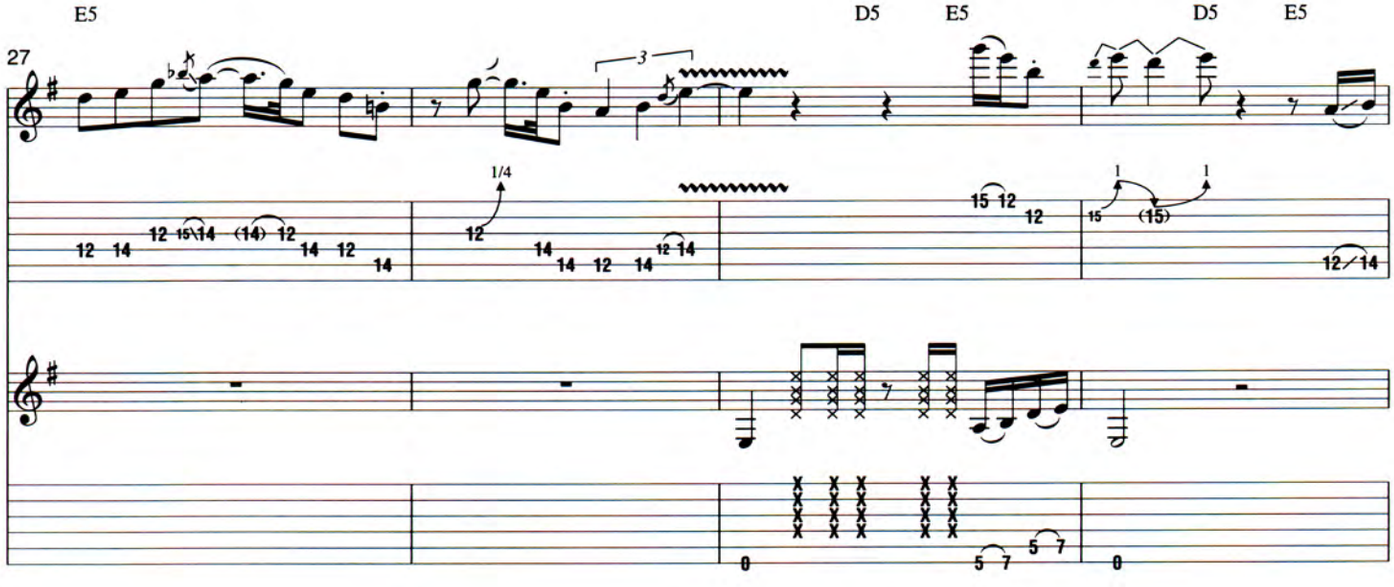
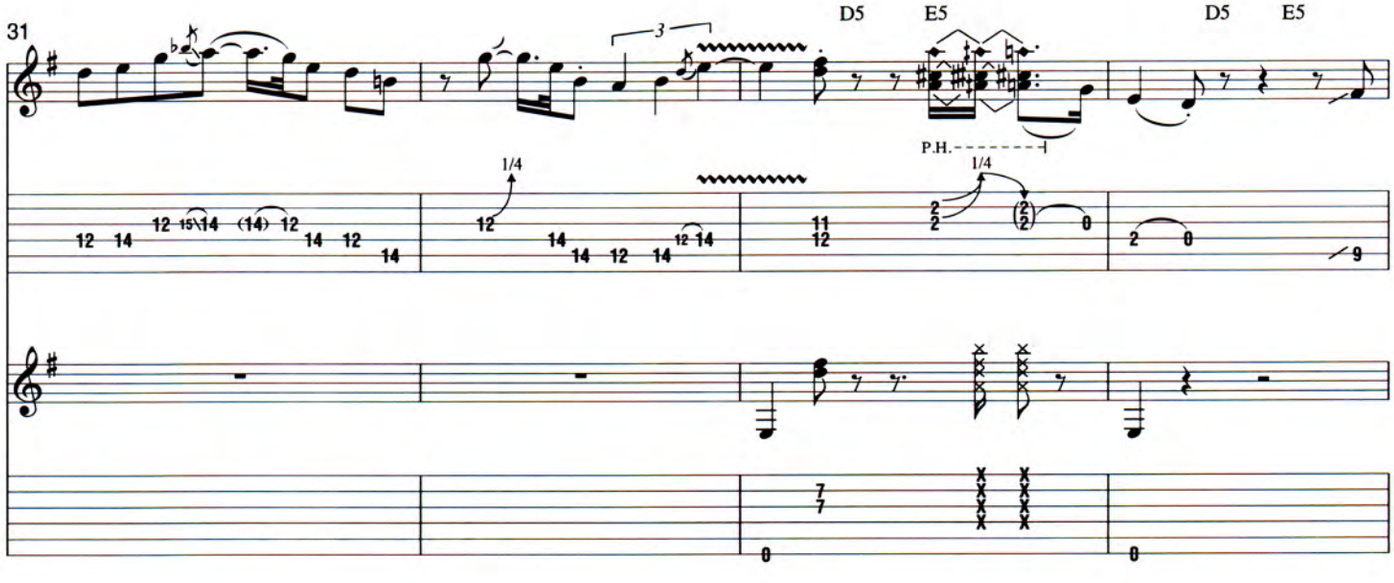
13
D5
E5
D5
E5
P.M.
1/4

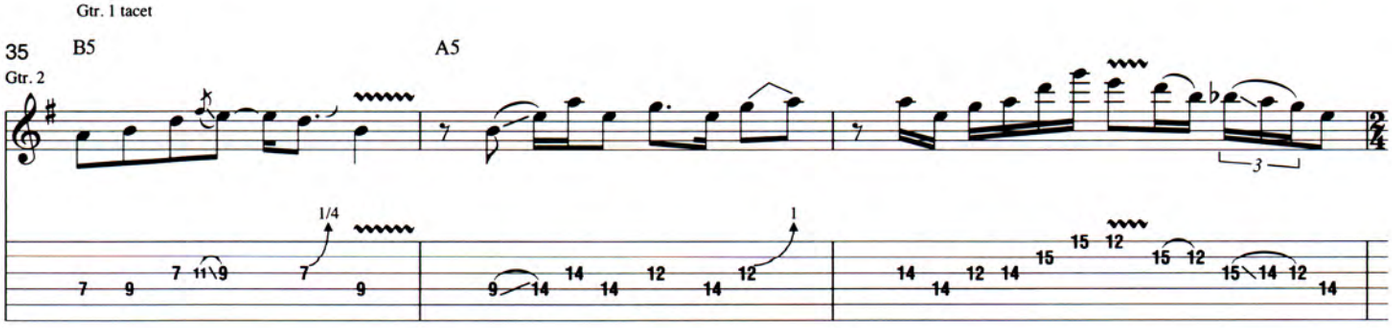

Gtr. 1 tacet
17
Gtr. 2
B5
A5
1/4
1/4
1/4

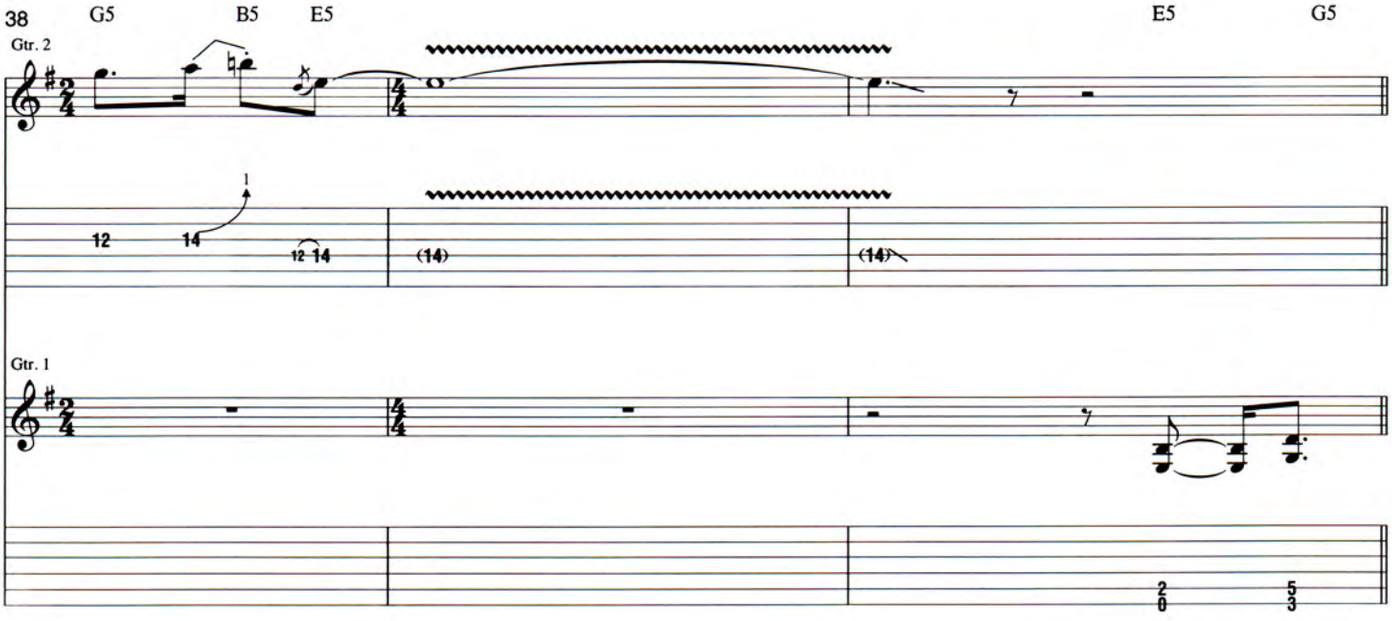

20
Gtr. 2
G5
B5
E5
D5
E5
1
1/4
Gtr. 1

C





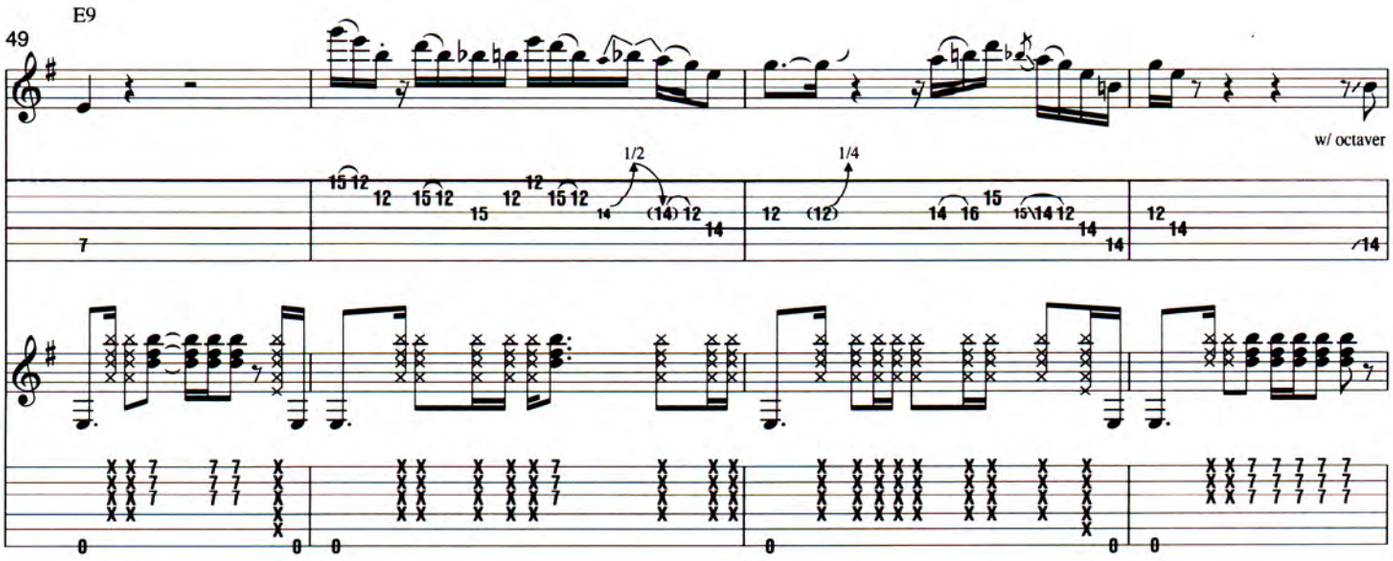

Gtr. 1 tacet
35
B5
A5
Gtr. 2

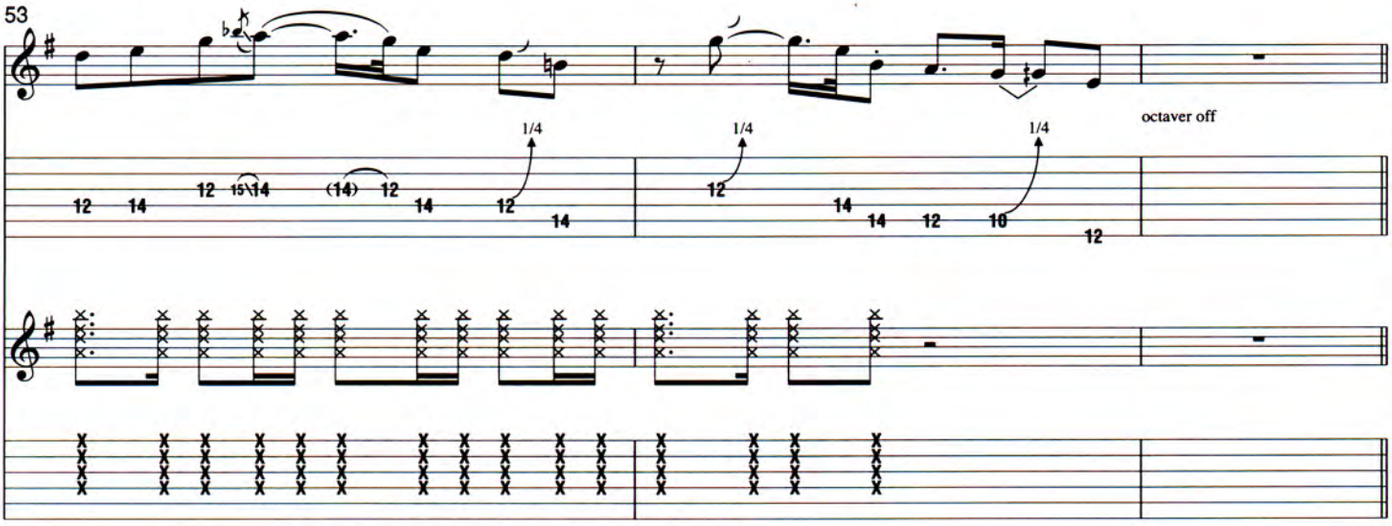

38
G5
B5
E5
E5
G5
Gtr. 2
Gtr. 1

D

41
A5
G5
A5
G5
A5
G5
A5
E5
G5

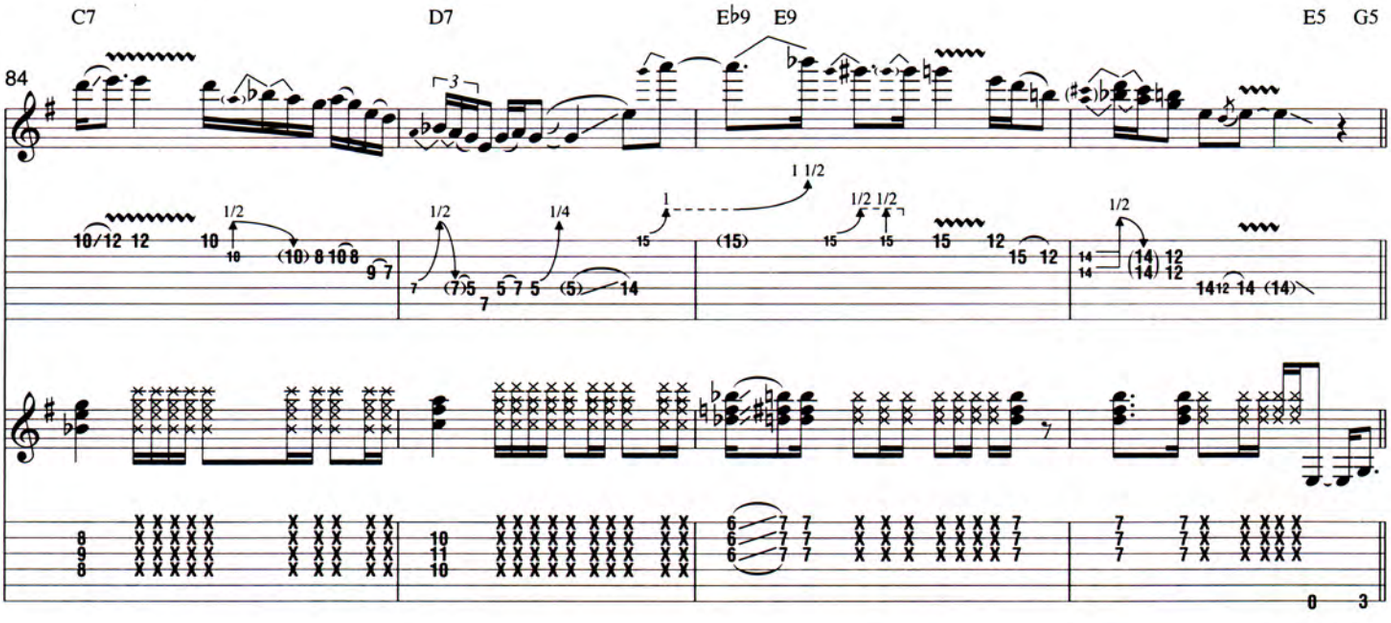
A5
G5
E5
B5
D5
E5
G5
B5
45
1/2


E9
49
w/ octaver
1/2
1/4

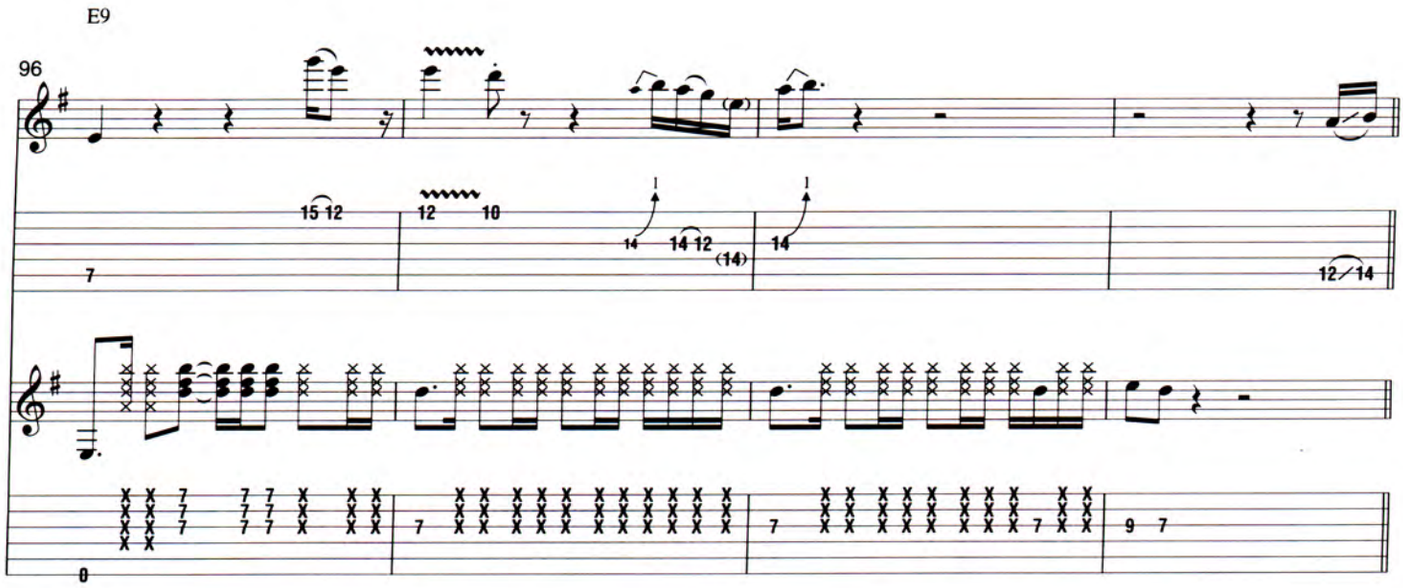

53
octaver off
1/4
1/4
1/4

E
E9
E7♯9
E9
E7♯9
56
A7
E7♯9
E9
60
let ring
64
P.M.
P.M.
P.M.

C7
D7
E9
68
8va
slight P.M.
72
8va
loco
A7
A7sus4
A7 A7sus4
E9
76



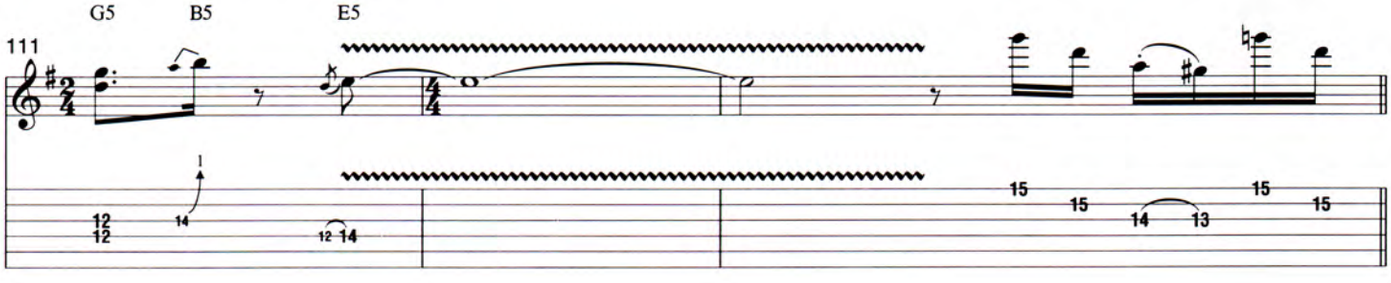
F

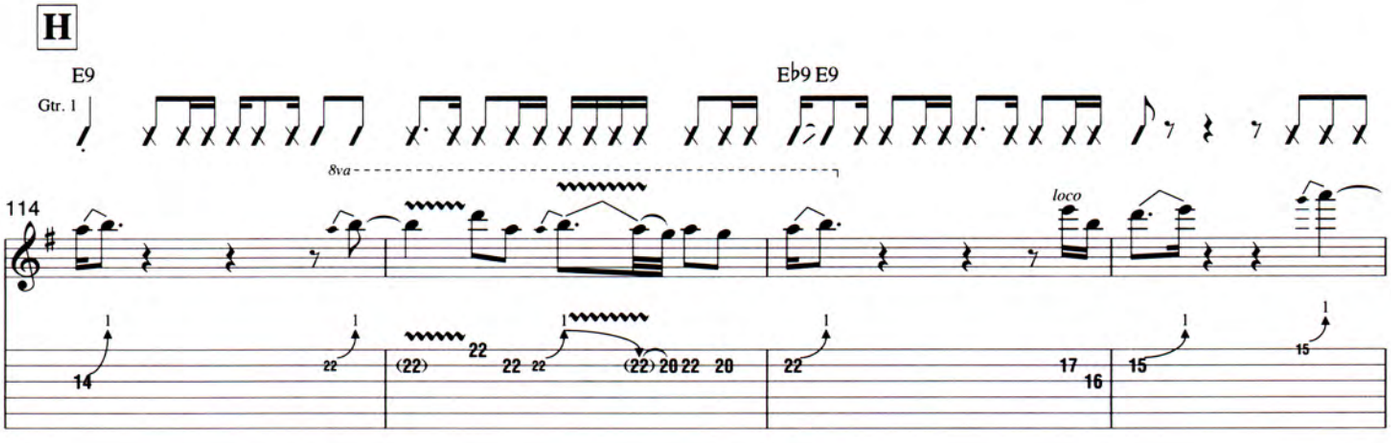


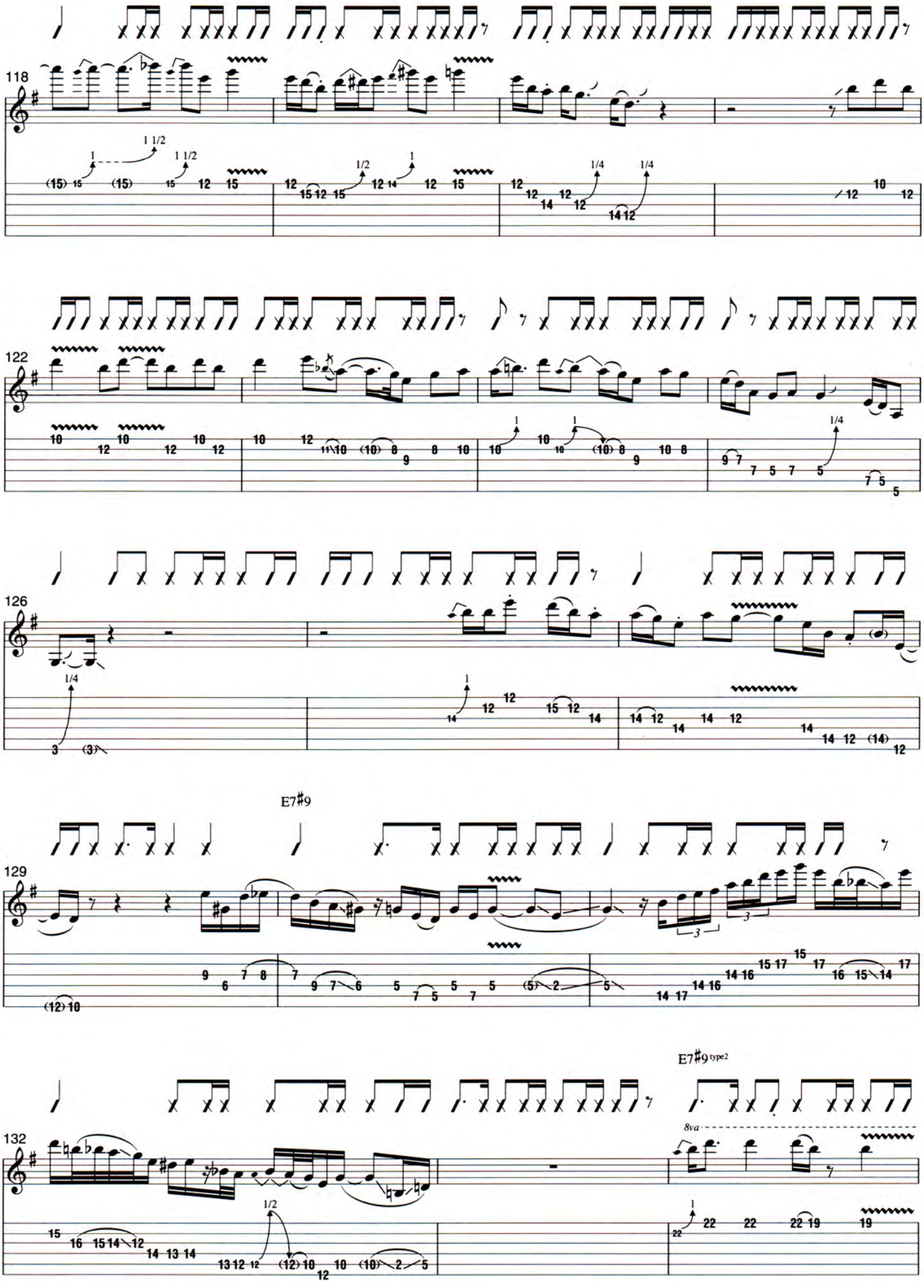
G

104
3
1/4

Gtr. 1 tacet
108
B5
A5
Gtr. 2
1/4
1/4
1/4


G5
B5
E5
111


H
E9
E♭9 E9
Gtr. 1
8va
114
loco


118
122
126
E7♯9
129
E7♯9 type2
8va
132

E9
(cont. in notation)
8va
135
P.H.
Begin fade
138
loco
Gtr. 2
1/4
Gtr. 1
Fade out
142
*Pinch E and B strings together under bending finger.

ESSENTIAL LICKS

This is the fun part of the book—nothing but licks! All of these phrases are in the style of Robben, and working through them will certainly help put you in the mindset of how the man sees and hears the scale shapes on the fretboard. Various keys are covered here, and nearly all of the licks are moveable, save for a few in open position.

Minor Pentatonic/Blues Scale

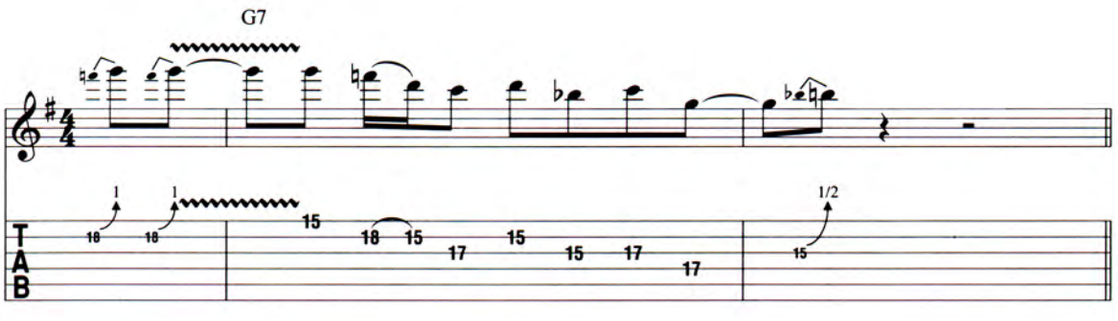
All of these licks come from the minor pentatonic or blues scale (minor pentatonic plus the ♭5th) and are either based out of box 1 or one of the extension boxes.

Lick 1

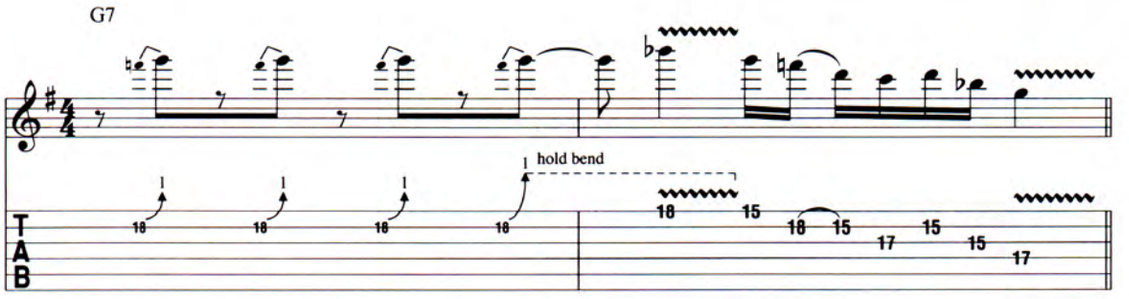
Lick 2

Lick 3

Lick 4

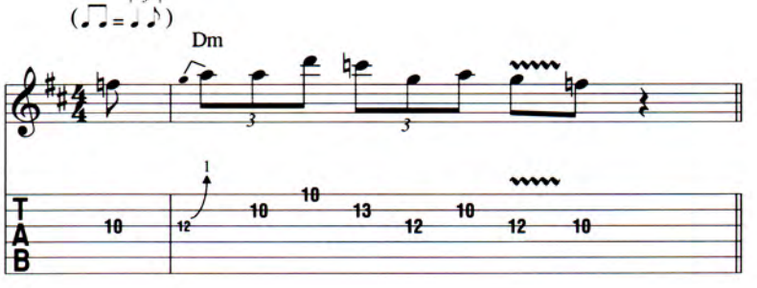


Lick 5

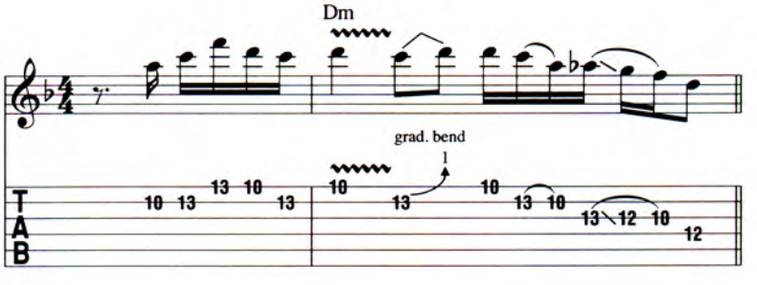


Lick 6

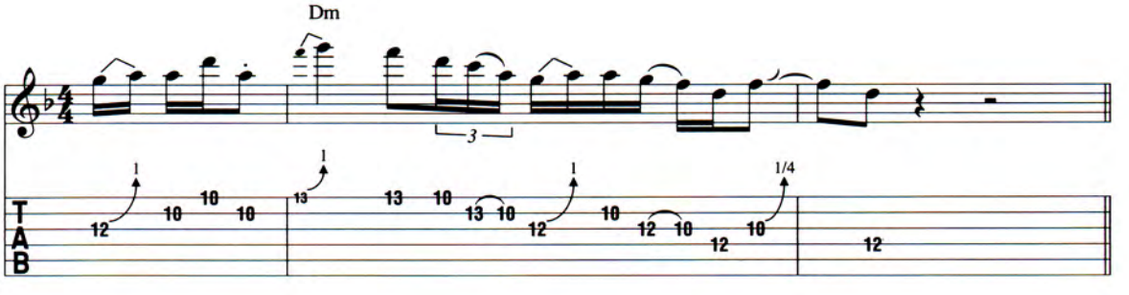
Lick 7



Lick 8



Lick 9



Lick 10

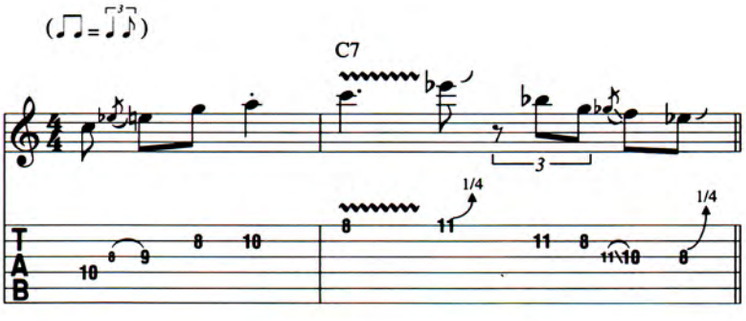
Composite Blues Scale

These licks combine the blues scale with the major pentatonic, which is Robben's M.O. a vast majority of the time.

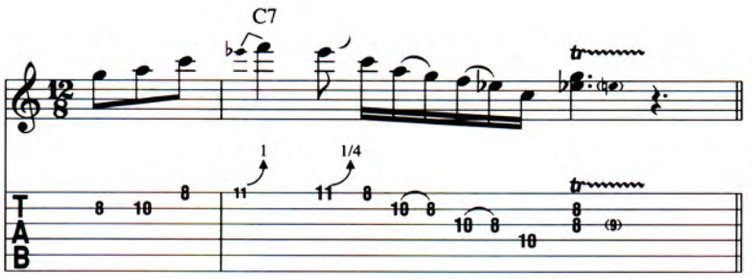
Lick 11

Lick 12

Lick 13

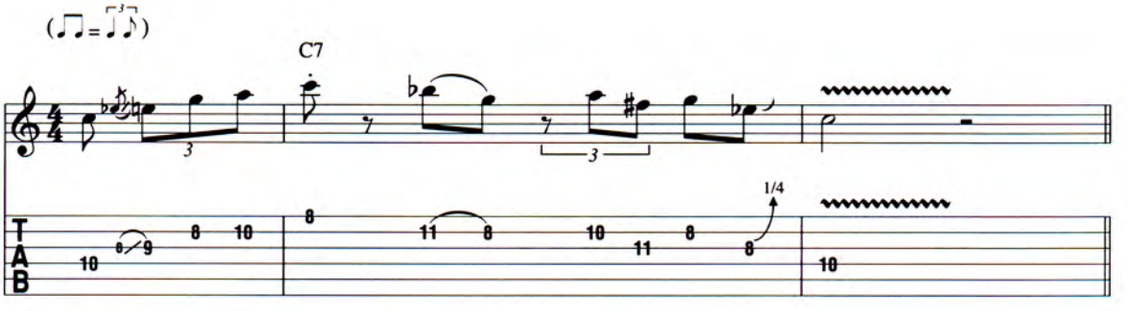


Lick 14

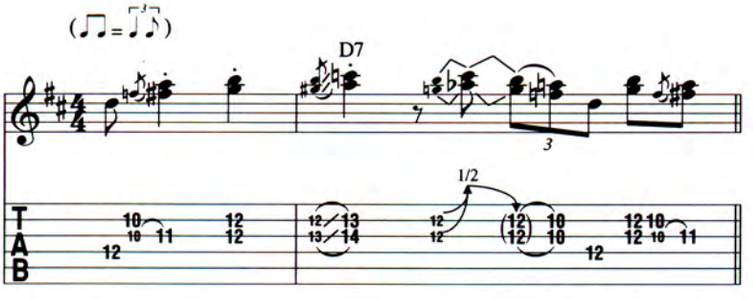


Lick 15

Lick 16



Lick 17



Lick 18

Lick 19

Lick 20

Other Scales

Melodic Minor

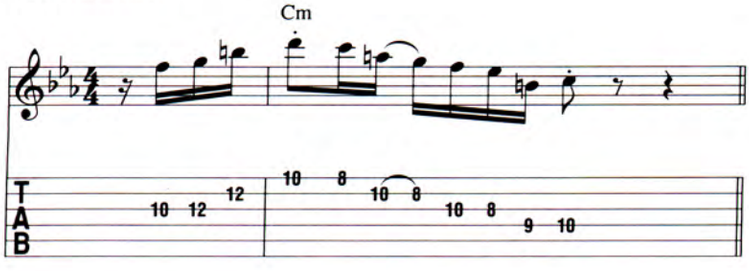
Robben will often use the melodic minor scale, built from the ii chord, in a ii–V progression, although he'll occasionally reference it for a slight "outside" sound over a tonic i chord as well.

Lick 21

G Melodic Minor

Lick 22

C Melodic Minor



Lick 23

D Melodic Minor

Half-Whole Diminished

This is one of Robben's favorite scales to play over altered dominant chords with an altered 9th and unaltered 13th. It's an eight-note scale built from a series of alternating half and whole steps.

Lick 24

C Half-Whole Diminished

Lick 25

G Half-Whole Diminished

Lick 26

B Half-Whole Diminished

Altered Scale (Super Locrian)

This is often Robben's choice when playing over an altered chord with an altered 5th and 9th. It's the seventh mode of melodic minor.

Lick 27

C Altered

Lick 28

D Altered

Lick 29

A Altered

SIGNATURE RHYTHM FARTS AND SOLOS

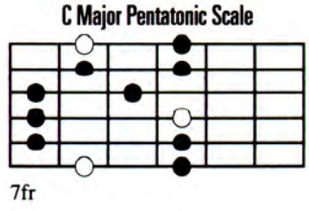
Let's take a look at some song excerpts that contain some of Robben's signature moves, both rhythm and lead. Each selection will help to highlight different aspects of Robben's style. Though his soloing usually gets most of the glory, he has a massive chord vocabulary and a killer rhythmic feel as well. These excerpts will also be arranged in chronological order.

Sweet Sixteen

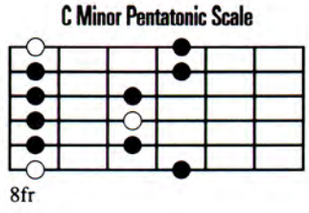
From *Discovering the Blues*, 1978

In this live setting, a young, 27-year-old Robben takes his turn on the slow-blues classic popularized by B.B. King, among others. Working with his Gibson ES-335 and most likely a cranked Fender Super Reverb, his tone is thick and creamy, and he phrases with a youthful energy and a sensitivity that belies his age.

He begins with the most classic slow-blues entrance of them all: the 5th, 6th, and root of the key, followed by a bend up to the major 3rd. This phrase is derived from the C major pentatonic scale in seventh position:



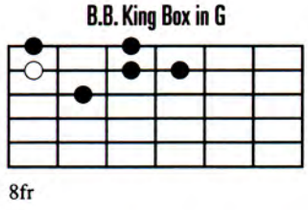
You should definitely perform this phrase with your index and ring fingers, supporting the ring-finger bend at fret 10 with the index and middle fingers. The phrase in measure 2, however, is derived from the C minor pentatonic box in eighth position:



All of this takes place in eighth position, with the exception being the drastic slide down to the tonic C note at fret 5. Use your ring finger for all the 11th-fret bends here. For the chromatic fifth-string walk-down at the end of the measure, begin with your ring finger on fret 10 and shift down to fret 7 with your index. In measures 3–4, Robben mixes notes from both scales (C major and C minor pentatonic) in eighth position, as well as including a chromatic passing tone. All of this is easily accessible in eighth position, but you should slide from fret 8 to fret 9 on string 3 with your middle finger to set you up for the C–B♭–C move that follows on string 4.

For the pickup phrase into measure 5, Robben cleverly adjusts the intro lick to fit the IV (F7) chord by bending a half step at fret 10 (to E♭, the ♭7th of F) and resolving to A at fret 10, string 2 (the 3rd of F). In measures 7–8, we see more of the major/minor pentatonic mixing going on in eighth position. Aside from reaching down to fret 7 with the index as needed, remain in eighth position here.

For the V (G7) chord in measure 9, Robben works out of the B.B. King box in G, playing a phrase that's very reminiscent of the King himself. That scale form looks like this:



Words and Music by B.B. King and Joe Bihari
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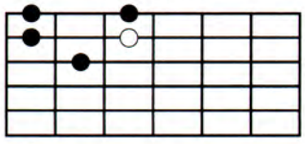
For the pickup to this measure (at the end of measure 8), bend fret 10 with the ring finger and use the index on fret 7, string 1. You can then walk up chromatically to your pinky (fret 10), which puts you in position to bend fret 10, string 2 with your ring finger. The short phrase that links measures 9 and 10 comes from the C minor pentatonic extension box in 11th position:

C Minor Pentatonic Scale
Extension Box



11fr

After that, he heads back to the eighth position and skillfully mixes major and minor pentatonic sounds till the end. Notice that he targets the major 3rd (E) over the C7 chord and the minor 3rd (E♭) over the F7 chord, where it functions as the ♭7th. Aside from beat 4 of measure 11, which should be played in seventh position, remain in eighth position for the most part, adjusting as necessary for the slide into the E note (string 3) in measure 12.

Sweet Sixteen
Intro Solo

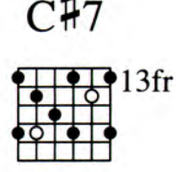
Intro
Very slow ♩. = 47

Rush Hour

From *Yellowjackets*, 1981

After recording his album *The Inside Story* in the late '70s, Robben decided to form the Yellowjackets with the backing band, which included L.A. session musicians Russell Ferrante on keys, Jimmy Haslip on bass, and Ricky Lawson on drums. Robben left the group after touring in support of their self-titled debut, and the Yellowjackets eventually drifted toward a slightly more commercial sound, going on to become a top-selling act for years to come.

"Rush Hour" is a classic example of early '80s-era funk fusion, and Robben's head for the song typifies the sound (shown here at about eight seconds into the original recording). Angular, syncopated, and full of surprises, it's also a lot of fun to play. The main phrase is derived from this C♯ dominant seventh arpeggio form in 13th position (although the 9th, D♯, is added at fret 16, string 2 and fret 13, string 4):



By Robben Ford and Russell Ferrante
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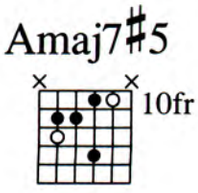
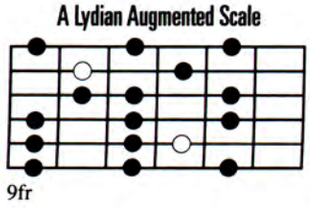
Half-step slides are used to give a bluesy edge to each major 3rd. Syncopation is the name of the game here, and the repetitive rhythm of two 16th notes followed by a 16th rest results in groupings that last three 16th notes, forming a hemiola that blurs the bar line a bit. Notice that the first phrase, which encompasses measure 1, beat 3 through the end of beat 1, measure 2, is immediately repeated verbatim an octave lower, only it's happening in a different part of the measure because of the hemiola. This entire phrase can be easily handled in 13th position, adjusting as necessary for the half-step slides.

In measure 4, the harmony moves to the ♭VI chord, Amaj7♯5, and the melody here is largely derived from an Amaj7♯5 arpeggio, with the first note, G, simply acting as a chromatic pickup note into the chord's major 7th, G♯. Here's the arpeggio form:



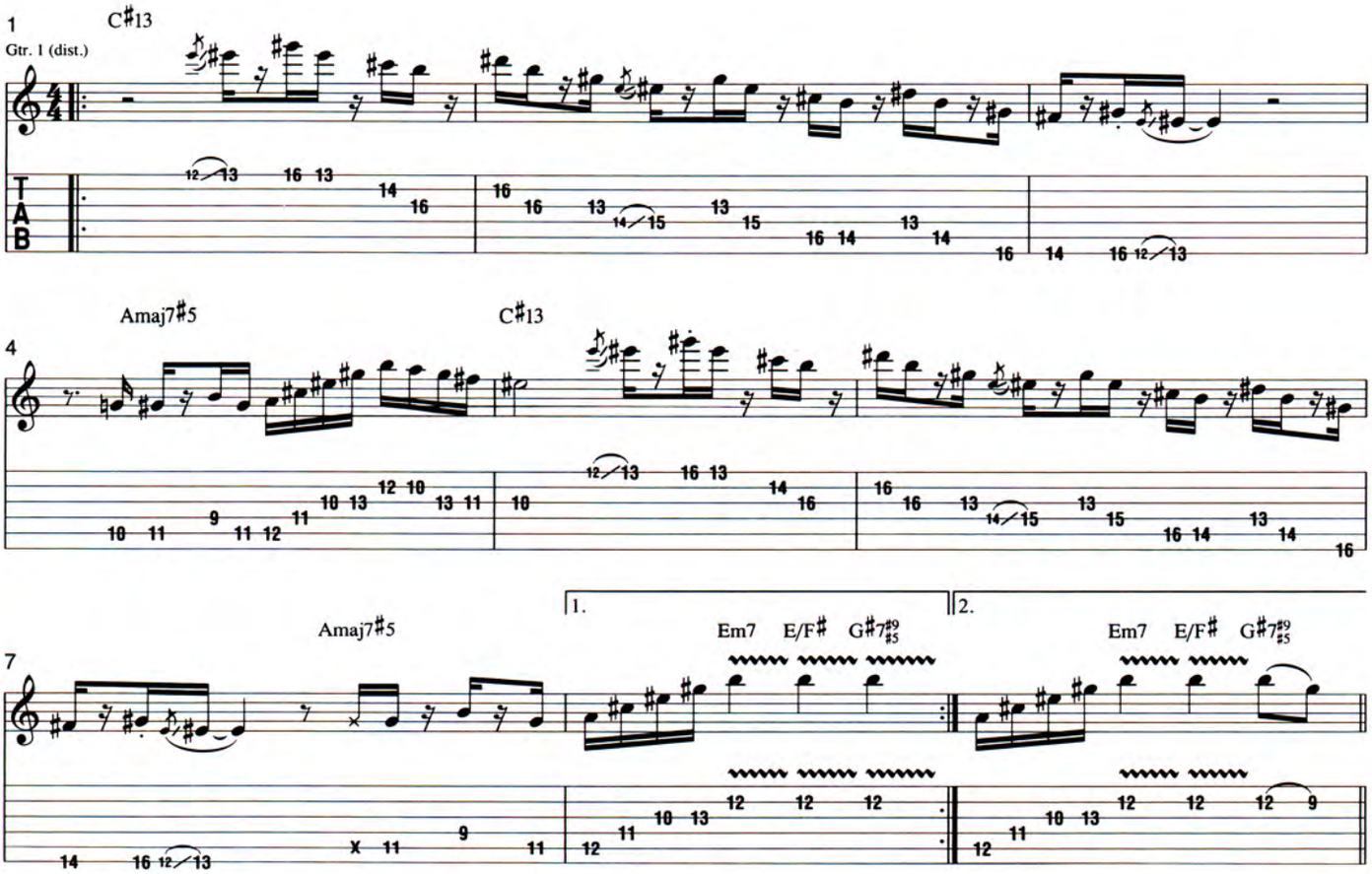
The scale used over this chord, which fills out the notes at the end of the phrase, is A Lydian augmented, the third mode of F♯ melodic minor. Here's that scale in this position:



If you begin with your index on the G note at fret 10, string 5, you can finger the entire line in 10th position, with the only exception being the B note at fret 9, string 4, which you can play by temporarily reaching back with your index finger. This phrase is varied slightly the second time (measures 7–8), where it can be handled entirely in 10th position.

Rush Hour
Head

Intro
Moderately ♩ = 123



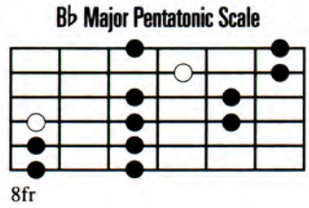
I Ain't Got Nothin' but the Blues

From *Talk to Your Daughter*, 1988

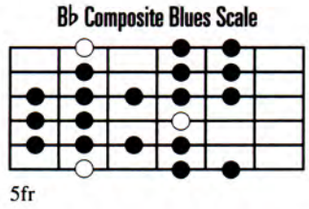
"I Ain't Got Nothin' but the Blues" is an old Duke Ellington song first recorded by his orchestra in the '40s and later popularized, once again, by Ella Fitzgerald in the '50s. Ford's take on this song is fairly intimate, with only keys, bass, and drums to back him. His smooth voice allows him to pull off a convincingly nice job crooning this one, but of course, it's his guitar work that steals the show.

As is his M.O. most of the time, Robben blends major and minor pentatonic (and blues) sounds effortlessly throughout this solo (starting at 2:09 in the original recording), spending much of his time in one of three scale forms:

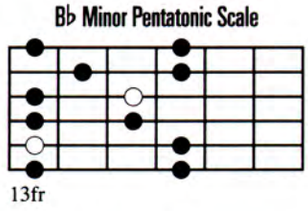
E♭ Major Pentatonic (measures 1–3, 9 [beat 4]–10, and 13)



E♭ Composite Blues (measures 4–5 and 12)



E♭ Minor Pentatonic (measures 8–9 and 14–15)



As such, the phrasing in those spots can be handled nicely in those forms, briefly reaching or shifting as needed. There are a few other spots, though, where Robben steps out a bit, the most notable being measures 11–12—also known as *the lick*. This is one that always turns the head of someone listening to this song for the first time. Robben lures you in with some nice, gentle blues phrases and then—*BAM!*—knocks you on your butt with this doozie. The chords here are basically Gm moving to C dominant, which is a ii–V in F. (Even though the harmony doesn't actually resolve to F, this is still very common.) One of Robben's favorite scalar devices for a ii–V is playing the melodic minor scale built from the root of the ii chord—in this case, G melodic minor. And that's exactly what's going on here. With the exception of the F note at fret 10, string 3 (beat 2), this is all G melodic minor; it's just not easy to spot because it's all over the neck.

You can remain in 10th position through most of beat 2. After pulling off from fret 12 to fret 11 on string 2, shift up to 14th position, grabbing fret 15, string 2 with your middle finger. For the slide down from fret 15, string 3, use your ring finger, which will put you in 12th position to finish out the lick.

Words by Don George
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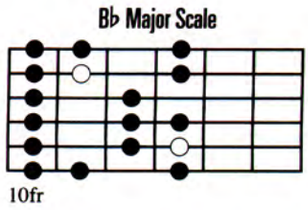
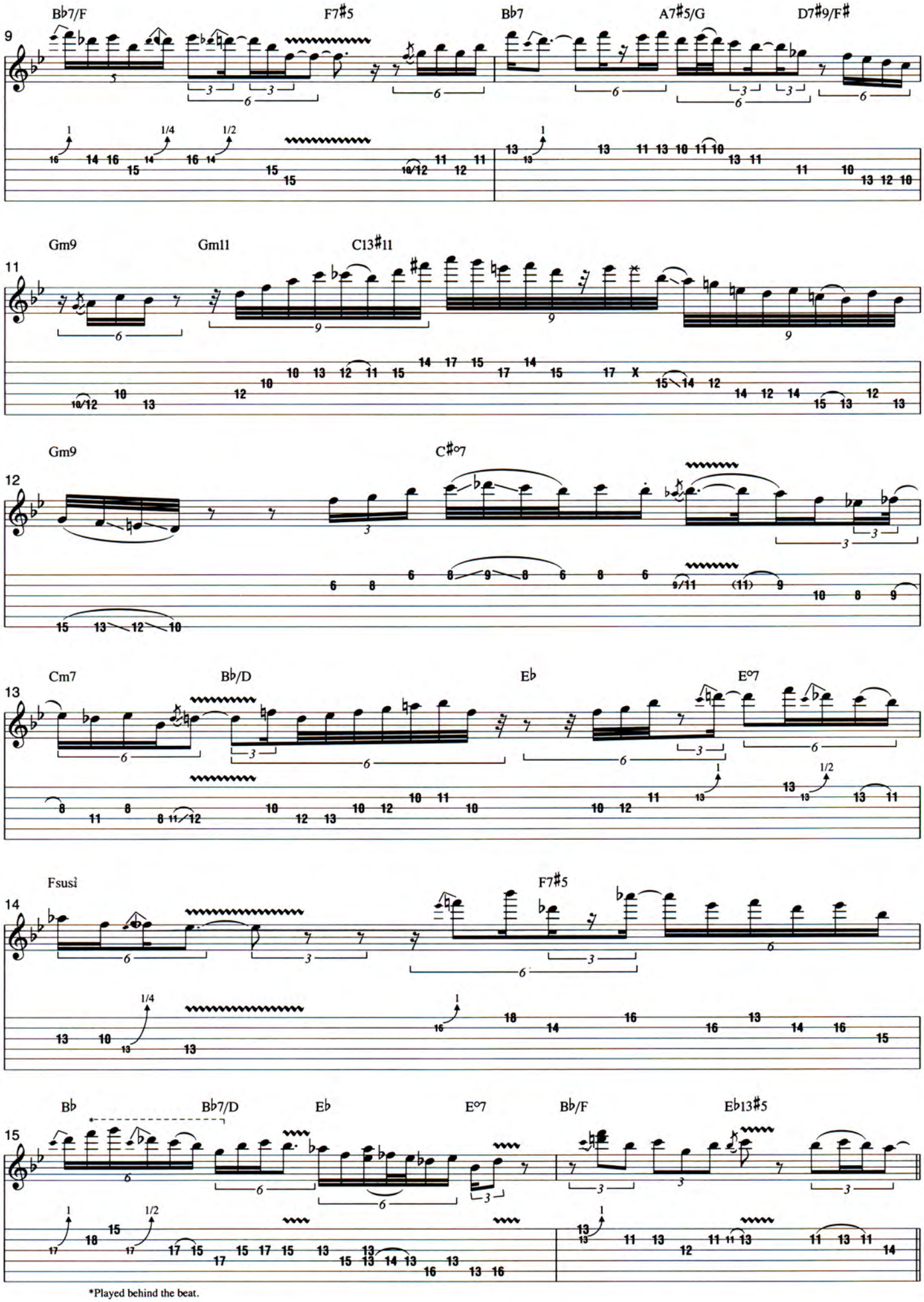
The fast run on beat 2 of measure 13 is simply from the B♭ major scale in 10th position:



As the feel of the solo is fairly *rubato* throughout, you'll most likely need to listen to the audio in order to get many of the rhythms down. However, it's important to note that it's not critical to match Robben's timing exactly for all of it, since Robben would never play it exactly the same again anyway.

I Ain't Got Nothin'
Solo



*Played behind the beat.

Born Under a Bad Sign

From *Talk to Your Daughter*, 1988

Though it's forever associated with Albert King, and rightfully so, Robben & Co. certainly left their own stamp on "Born Under a Bad Sign." The product of a spontaneous jam session in the studio, the song was never intended to be part of the *Talk to Your Daughter* album. Lucky for us, they liked what they heard on tape and decided to include it. Robben is on fire on this track, with effortless phrasing, killer tone, and palpable enthusiasm. We'll take a look at the first half of his killer solo on this one, which, on the original recording, begins at around the 1:25 mark.

Robben begins wide open, with soaring bends from the "Albert Box," a nickname for the upper-extension pentatonic box from which so many players imitate King's licks (though Albert actually played very differently). This puts you in 13th position, and the 15th-fret bends should be executed with the ring finger. After the opening phrase, Robben moves down to home base, the 10th-position D minor pentatonic box, in measure 2.

Check out the stinging *tritone* interval—B (the 6th) to F (the ♭3rd)—in measure 4, which Robben delivers with decidedly attention-getting gusto. Handle the 20th-fret bends in measure 5 with your ring finger and the C note on fret 20, string 1 with your pinky, relocating to 15th position for measures 6 and 8, and temporarily slipping up in measure 7 to grab the stratospheric tonic D note at fret 22, string 1 with your pinky. Don't overlook the staccato markings on these D notes!

In measure 9, over the A7 chord, Robben whips out a slightly country-sounding blues bend, using his ring finger to bend fret 16, string 3 up a whole step and grabbing the high A note at fret 17, string 1 with the pinky. In measure 10, he moves once again to the Albert box in 13th position, relocating to home base (10th position) in measure 11. On beat 4, roll your ring finger to catch the 12th-fret notes on strings 4–3.

Born Under
a Bad Sign Solo

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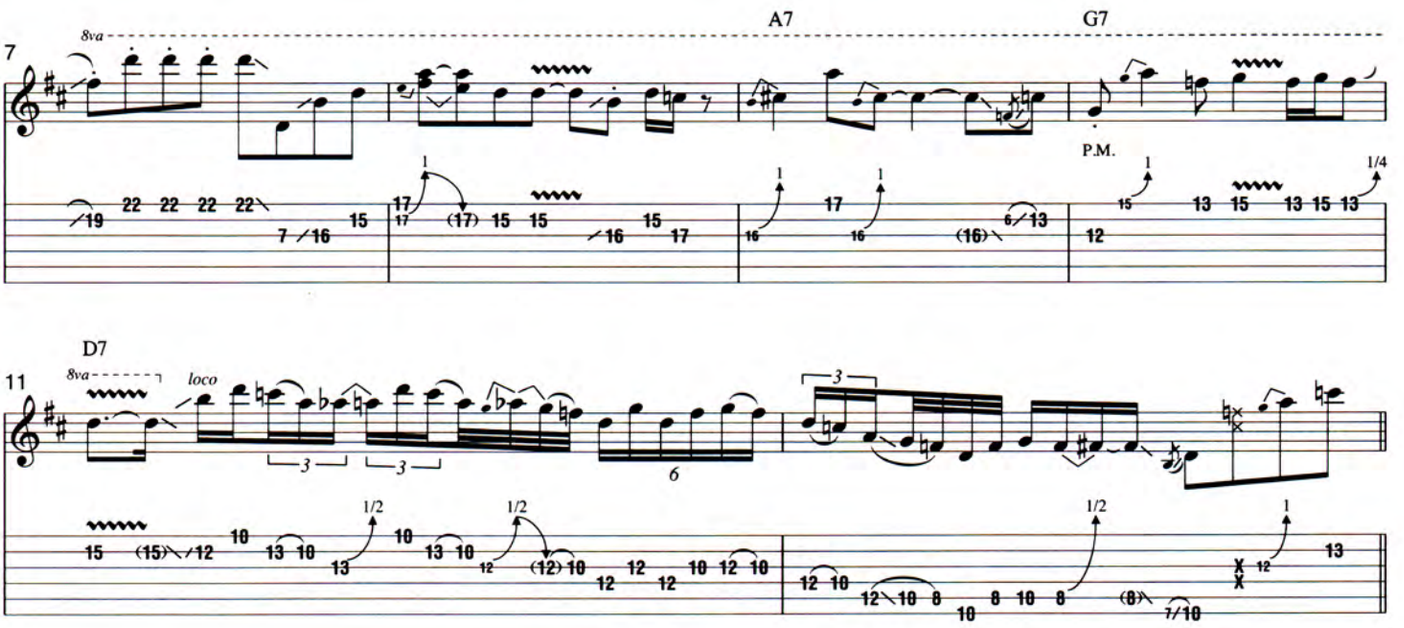
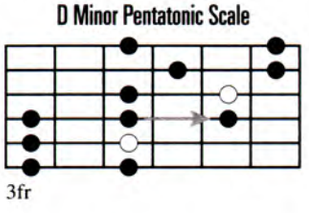


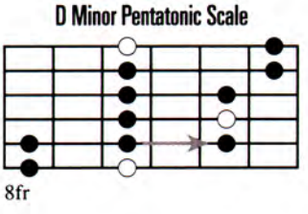
Help the Poor

From *Talk to Your Daughter*, 1988

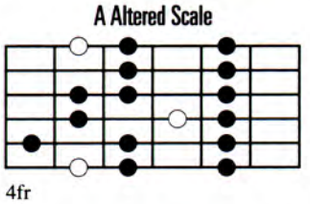
B.B. King was certainly a massive influence on Ford, so it's no surprise that one of King's songs would be among the few covers on *Talk to Your Daughter*. While B.B. may have played it a bit cooler in his version, sticking to a more traditional blues vocabulary, Robben embraces the song's jazzier harmony a bit more and shows how you can infuse your blues phrasing with a sophisticated sensibility without sacrificing a bit in the "feel" department. We'll look at the second half of his first solo here, which occurs around the 2:34 mark on the original.

Robben's approach in this solo is largely based on double-time phrasing, with 16th-note phrases being more common than eighth-note ones. He spends a great deal of his time in two extended forms of D minor pentatonic (occasionally adding the ♭5th blue note, as well), which look like this:





In both of these forms, the ring finger is normally used to slide or shift to and from the lower extension, and most of the phrases are easily fingered using only the index and ring fingers in this fashion. There are a few spots, though, when he takes a notable departure from this tried-and-true fretboard roadmap. The first occurs in measure 12, over the A7♯5 chord. This is what's known as an altered dominant chord and, although you could play D blues sounds over it and sound just fine (as B.B. often demonstrates), it also provides an opportunity to get a bit more colorful with your note selection. The phrase Robben plays here is built from the A altered scale (also known as A super Locrian, or A half-diminished/half whole tone). The altered scale is basically the last mode of a melodic minor scale; in this case, the notes of B♭ melodic minor, starting from A. Here's how that scale looks in this position:



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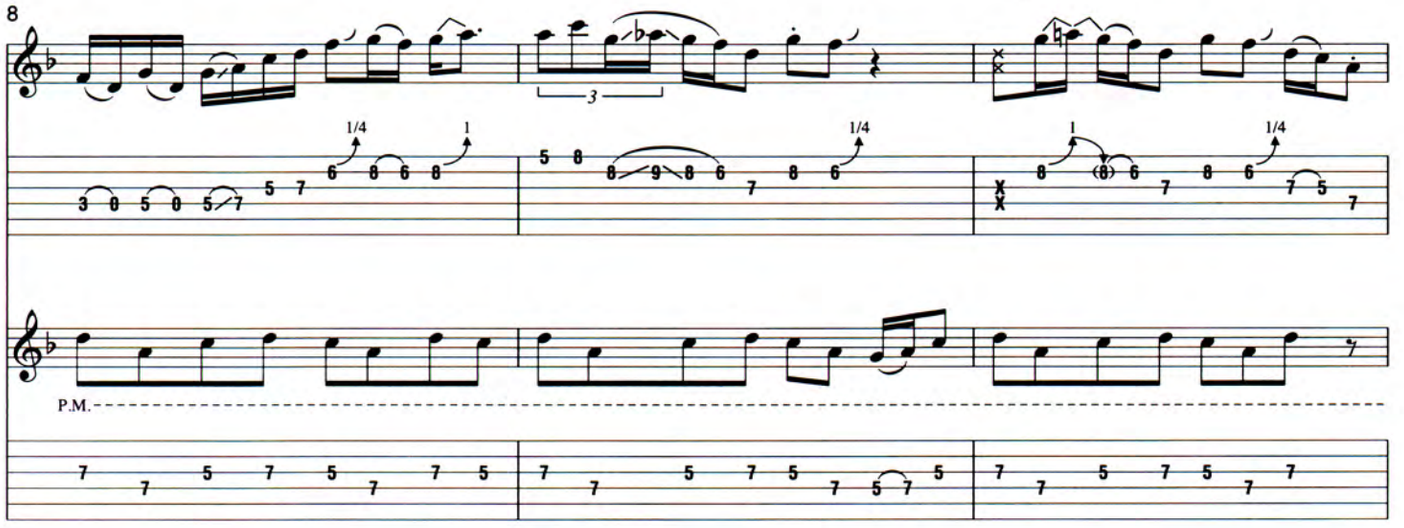
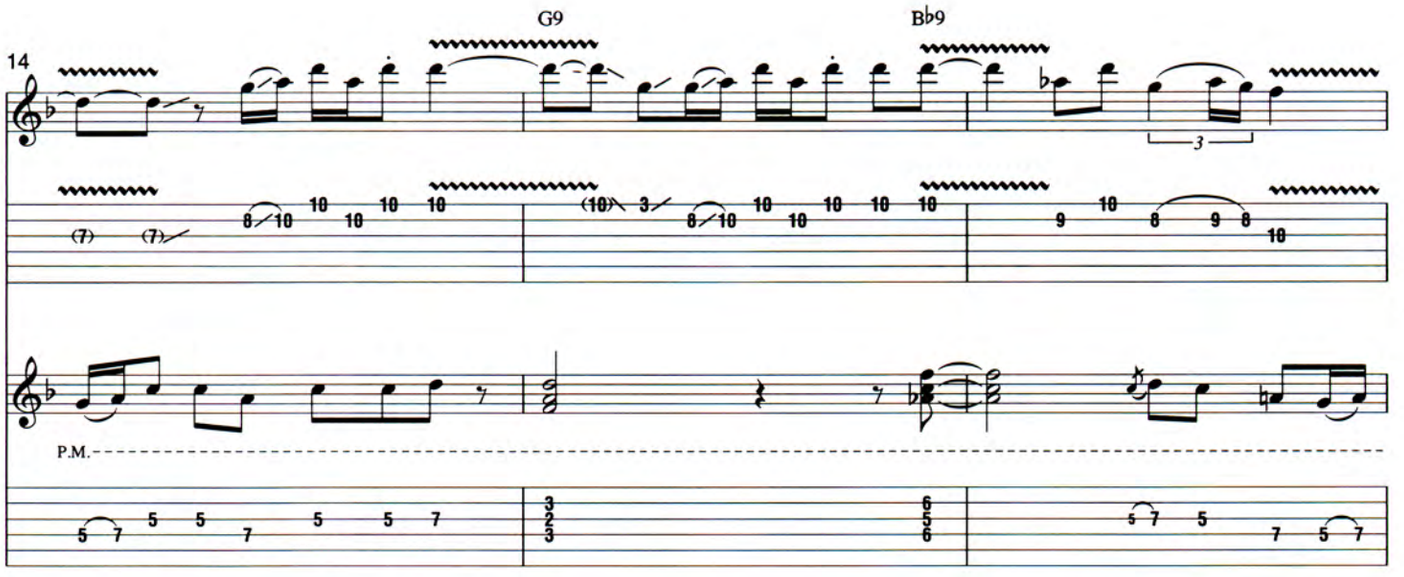
This lick can be handled comfortably in fifth position, but there a few spots to watch out for. At the end of beat 1, roll your middle finger from fret 6, string 3 to string 2. On beat 2, Robben would use his pinky for the eighth-fret notes on string 1 and his ring for the one on string 2. Leading into beat 3, you'll need to shift from your pinky to your middle finger for the F note on fret 6, string 2, but fret with more of the pad of your middle finger so you'll be able to roll it down to string 3 (on beat 4).

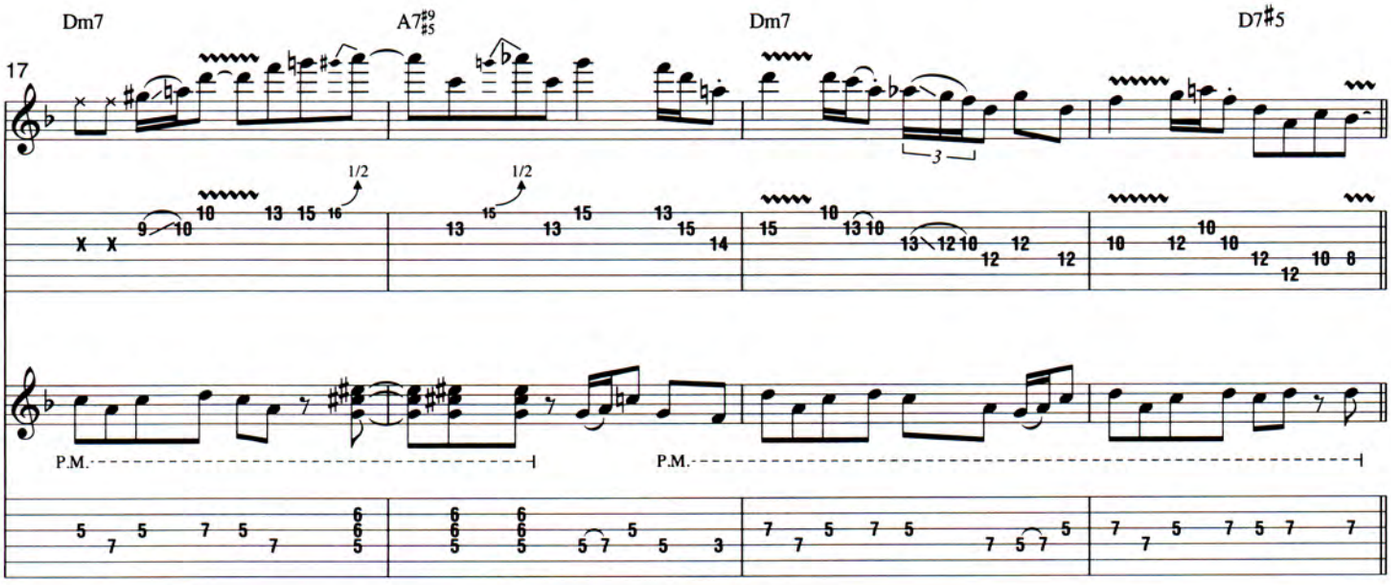
For measures 14–16, use your pinky for all the 10th-fret notes on string 1, with your ring finger taking all 10th-fret notes on string 2. Don't miss how Robben, once again, nails the changes, playing the A♭ note at fret 9, string 2 over the B♭9 chord, where it functions as the ♭7th.

Help the Poor
Solo 1


8
P.M.

11
A13sus4
A7♯5
Dm9
P.M.


14
G9
B♭9
P.M.



Life Song (One for Annie)

From *Robben Ford & the Blue Line*, 1992

With *Robben Ford & the Blue Line* (1992), Robben stripped down his sound and style a bit, focusing more on less-sophisticated, grittier-sounding blues and blues rock. The closer, "Life Song," demonstrates Robben's Hendrix-inspired R&B side, among other things. His voicings are clear and crisp, as is his tone, and the song is basically a lesson in chord-melody style as it applies to rock guitar.

Robben plays with his fingers on this one. In order to match his sound, it's imperative to do the same, as it's the only way to get the dynamics he does. Some notes are softly plucked, while others are really popped by pulling the string up and away from the guitar and letting it slap against the fretboard. He begins with a phrase that sounds as though it's in the key of D, but we soon learn that the song is in the key of E.

You'll need to do quite a bit of shifting at the beginning. The first three pickup notes can be played in ninth position, but you'll need to quickly shift to 10th position on the downbeat and then up again, to 12th position, on beat 2. Hold the high D on fret 10, string 1 with your index finger and, without letting that go, hammer from fret 11 to fret 12 on string 3 with your middle and ring fingers, respectively. The lick on beat 2 is straight Hendrix and should be performed by barring your index at fret 12 (strings 5–3) and hammering with your ring finger to fret 14, string 5.

In measure 2, begin in ninth position and then quickly shift to 11th position on beat 2, holding fret 12, string 2 with your middle finger while you hammer from fret 11 (index) to fret 13 (ring) on string 3—another Hendrix favorite. Repeat this move on the "and" of beat 3, but pull off to fret 11 and then slide down to fret 9. For the five-string E5 chord in measure 3, use your thumb and all four fingers to pluck it "piano style," instead of strumming through it.

At the end of measure 3, slide up from fret 8 to fret 9 with your index finger and then use a ring/pinky fingering for the 11th-fret 4ths and an index barre for the ninth-fret ones. The final phrase should be fingered in ninth position, with your pinky taking the 12th fret on string 6.

By Robben Ford
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Life Song
Intro

Start It Up

From *Robben Ford & the Blue Line*, 1992

"Start It Up" represents Robben in a very typical blues shuffle in E setting, not terribly dissimilar from Stevie Ray's bread and butter. We're going to take a look at Robben's rhythm approach here, which is tighter and more controlled-sounding than Stevie's more wide-open approach on songs like "Pride and Joy," for instance.

After a short intro, the verse kicks in as Robben works out of standard open-position E boogie shapes, but he presents a more streamlined approach here that better suits his smooth vocal delivery. He applies a slight palm mute by laying the pick-hand palm lightly in front of the bridge (see photos K1–K3). The farther in from the bridge you lay your palm, the more muted the sound will be.

By Robben Ford
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We're going for a slight mute here, so you don't need to be too far in front of the bridge. Use downstrokes for all the quarter-note chords on the downbeats and upstrokes for any note or chord on the upbeats, including the E chord at the end of measure 3. For measures 5–6, the same approach is applied to the IV (A7) chord, as is normally the case with this style. You should remain in second position throughout measures 1–8, save for the instances when you need to hop back briefly for the open E chord accents.

For the B chord in measures 9–10, you have to suck it up and make the long stretch. Some players prefer to use the index and middle fingers for frets 2 and 4, as this somewhat prepares you for the full stretch to fret 6 with the pinky, while others prefer to use the index and ring instead. Try both to see what feels best.

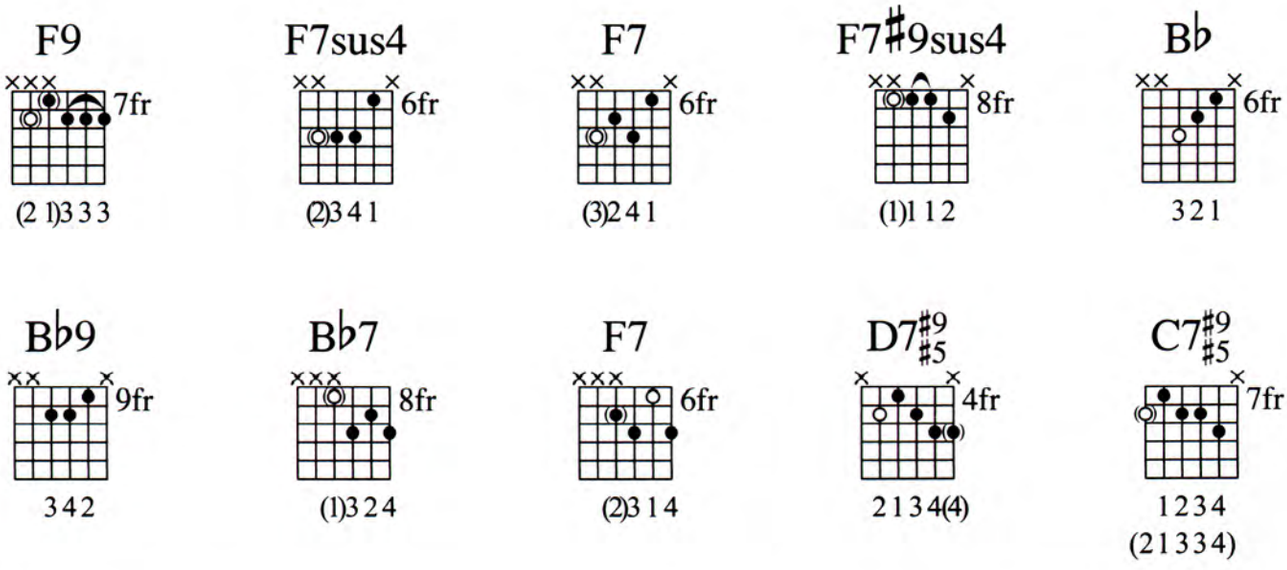
Start It Up
Blues Shuffle

Busted Up

From *Mystic Mile*, 1993

The second outing for the Blue Line, *Mystic Mile* (1993), expanded the trio's sound a bit, as they dipped their feet in a few waters outside of the first album's reach. A case in point is "Busted Up," a funky, playful blues that shows off Robben's formidable rhythm feel, which is our focus here. Robben's knowledge of voicings shines on this one, and he demonstrates a knack for playing only what's necessary—nothing more.

Most likely sporting his Tele and a wah pedal, Robben funks his way through the chorus (starting at 0:52 in the original recording), filling in the space with muted strums and accenting choice chord partials. Sticking to mostly three-note voicings here, he pares it down to the essential tones, which results in a balanced arrangement, leaving plenty of sonic room for the vocals and sparse licks from Gtr. 2. Although the chord symbols represent the basic harmony here, Robben does much to dress things up a bit. Below is a look at the various voicings that he employs. To help you visualize the voicings from which these fragment are derived, the rest of the chord form is shown in parentheses (the roots are illustrated with an open circle).



Regarding your pick hand, it should be moving in a 16th-note rhythm, with downstrokes occurring on every eighth note. That is, the notes that occur on down- and upbeats will be articulated with downstrokes, while the 16th notes in between those notes will be struck with upstrokes. Regarding the wah pedal, a good starting point is to simply rock the pedal to the beat, adjusting as necessary to accent the chord hits with a toe-down position (trebly sound).

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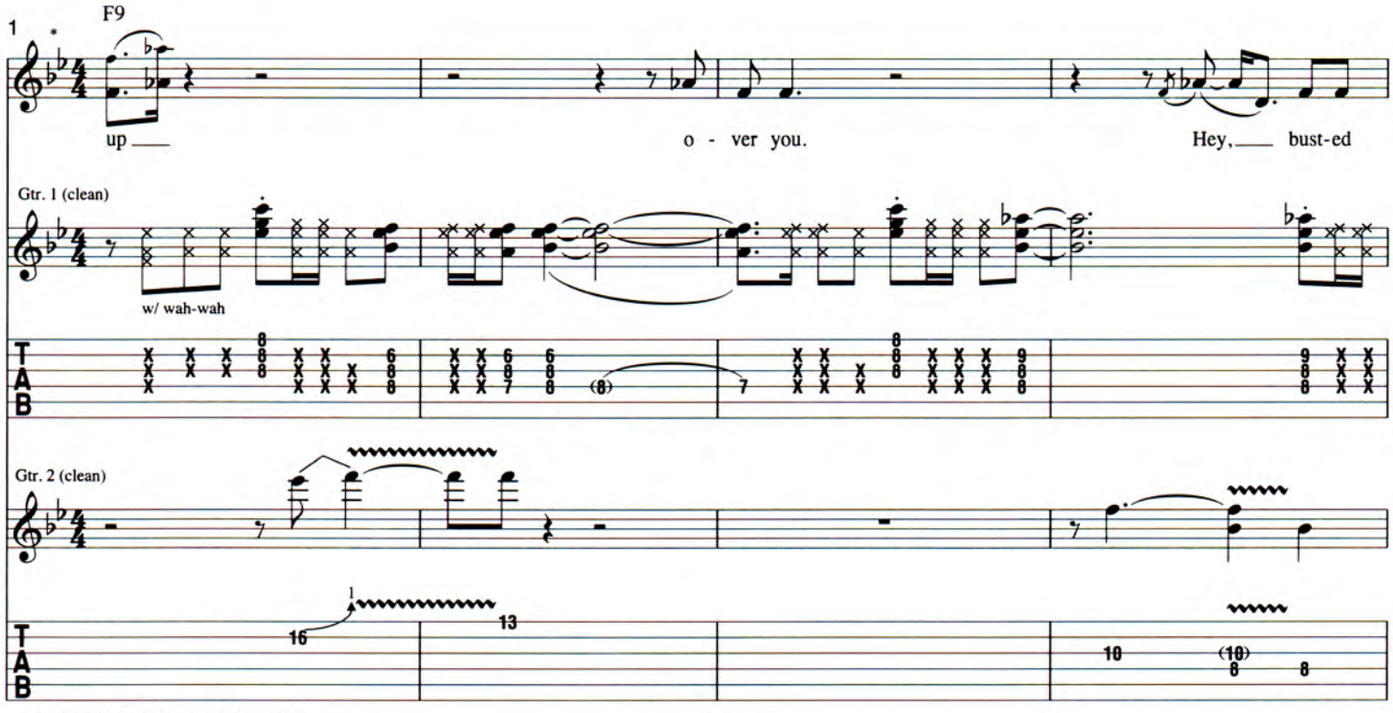
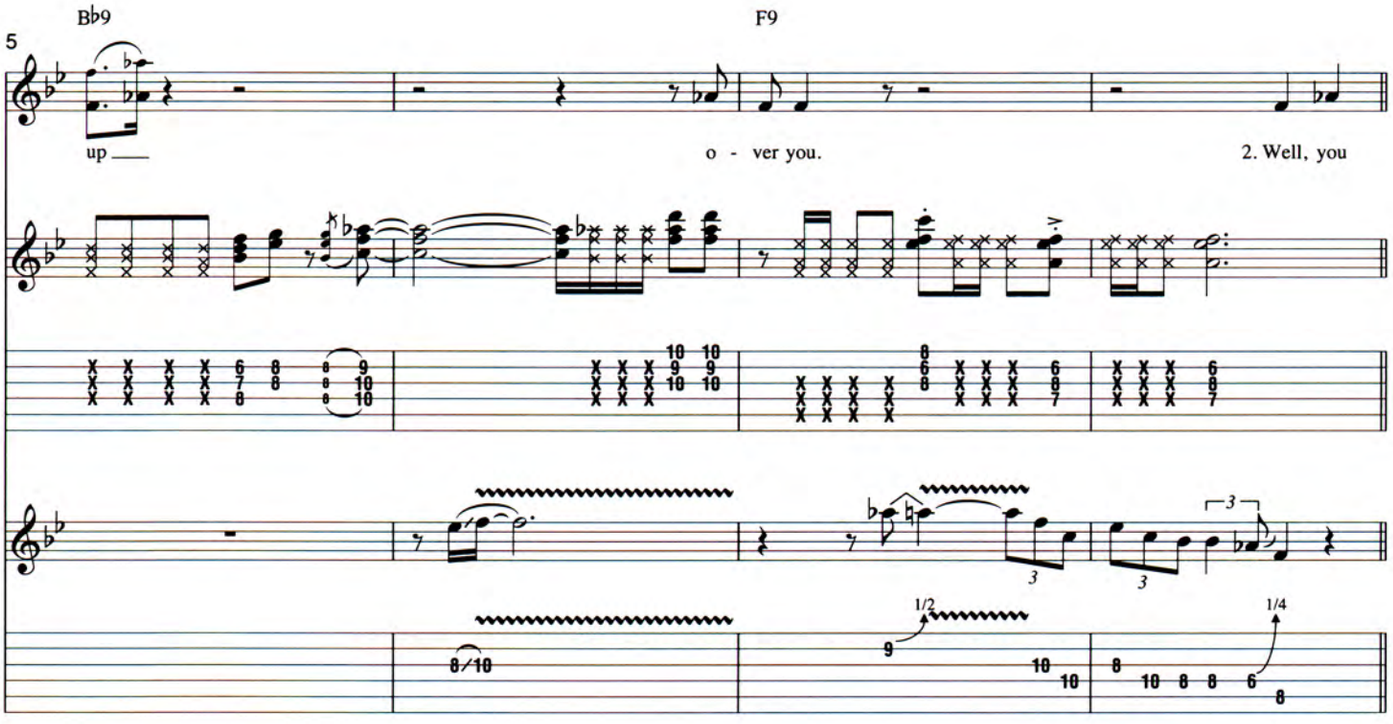
Busted Up
Rhythm Figures

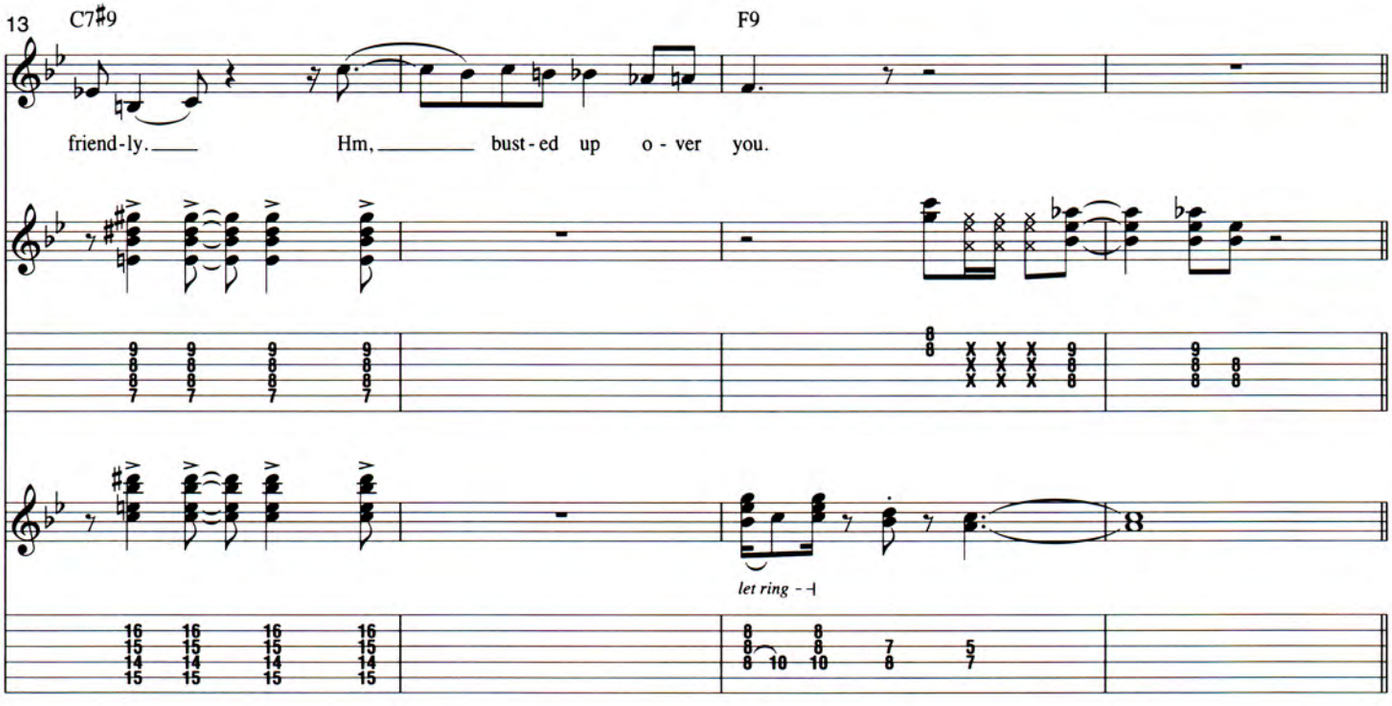
Chorus
Moderate Funk ♩ = 128



*Key signature denotes F Mixolydian.



Verse
9
F9
D7#9 #5
o - pen up the door an' you slam it in my face. That ain't too

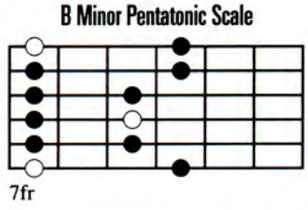

13
C7#9
F9
friend-ly. Hm, bust-ed up o - ver you.
let ring

Rugged Road

From *Handful of Blues*, 1995

Eric Clapton's work with Cream was also quite an influence on Robben, and the gutsy intro riff to "Rugged Road," from *Handful of Blues* (1995), bears some testament to that fact. Simple, catchy, and to the point, it sets the stage for a gospel-tinged blues-rock stomp that opens the album and serves as a highlight.

There's nothing fancy here; it's all about attitude. Working from the B minor pentatonic box in seventh position, he fashions a charged, syncopated, repetitive riff that cycles three times before wrapping up in measure 4 with a more downbeat-situated consequent phrase. Here's the familiar form:



Robben doubles the riff for maximum thickness on the recording, with one guitar set clean and the other dirty. The clean is most likely the Tele, and the dirty one may be as well, though it's a bit hard to distinguish. For the double-stop bend in measure 4 (Gtr. 2), Robben would either use his ring and pinky or just barre his pinky, which may be uncomfortable for most. You could also flatten out your ring finger, as the exactness of the pitches is not terribly important here. Remember to dig in!

Rugged Road
Intro Riff

*Key signature denotes B Mixolydian.

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Red Lady with Cello

From *Tiger Walk*, 1997

For *Tiger Walk*, Robben took a break from the vocals and let his guitar do all the talking (and "walking") for him. He also worked with a new rhythm section for the album, including Steve Jordan on drums, Charlie Drayton on bass, and Bernie Worrel on keys. The music drifts from jazz rock to funk, rock to R&B, and stops at a few places in between. "Red Lady with Cello" somewhat recalls fusion-era Jeff Beck: *Wired* and *Blow by Blow*.

Though the song certainly contains its share of changes at times, for the solo, the band settles into a two-chord vamp of Bm7–Em7 (i–iv in the key of B minor). This occurs around 2:03 on the original recording. Robben kicks on the wah here and starts off with very inside yet grooving pentatonic phrases out of the home box (seventh position), which recalls Hendrix's work on songs like "All Along the Watchtower" a bit. Aside from the brief shift up to the 9th (C♯) at fret 11, string 4 in measure 5, Ford doesn't leave seventh position at all throughout the first 10 measures. He does skillfully include the G note at fret 8, string 2 with the middle finger over the Em7 chord, where it functions as the ♭3rd. At the end of measure 10, he descends through the lower extension box (fifth position) with a ring-finger slide from fret 9 to fret 7.

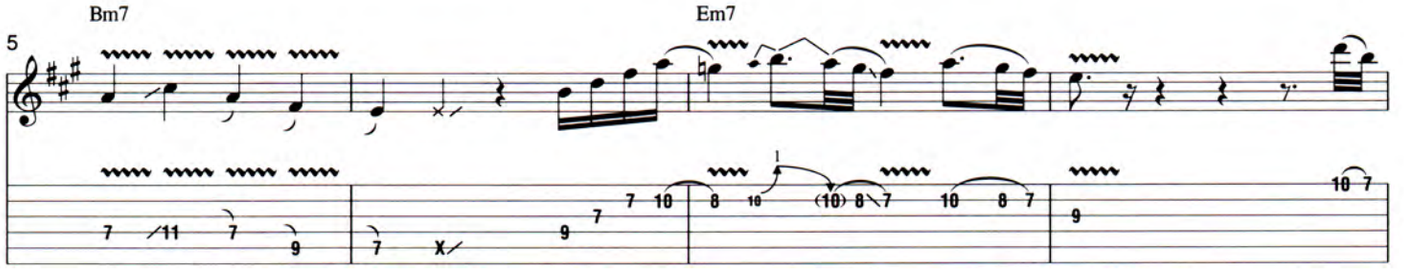
At measure 11, shift up to the E minor pentatonic box in 12th position and, in measure 13, shift up to 14th position, bending fret 17, string 2 with your ring and taking fret 17, string 1 with your pinky. You can remain there until beat 4 of measure 15, at which point you'll briefly shift to 10th position and then back down to seventh position on beat 2 of measure 16. The groove is paramount here, so make sure that your phrasing lays deep in the pocket—the way Robben's does!

Red Lady with Cello Solo

F

Funk Rock ♩ = 102 (♪♪♪♪ = ♪♪♪♪)

*Key signature denotes B Dorian.



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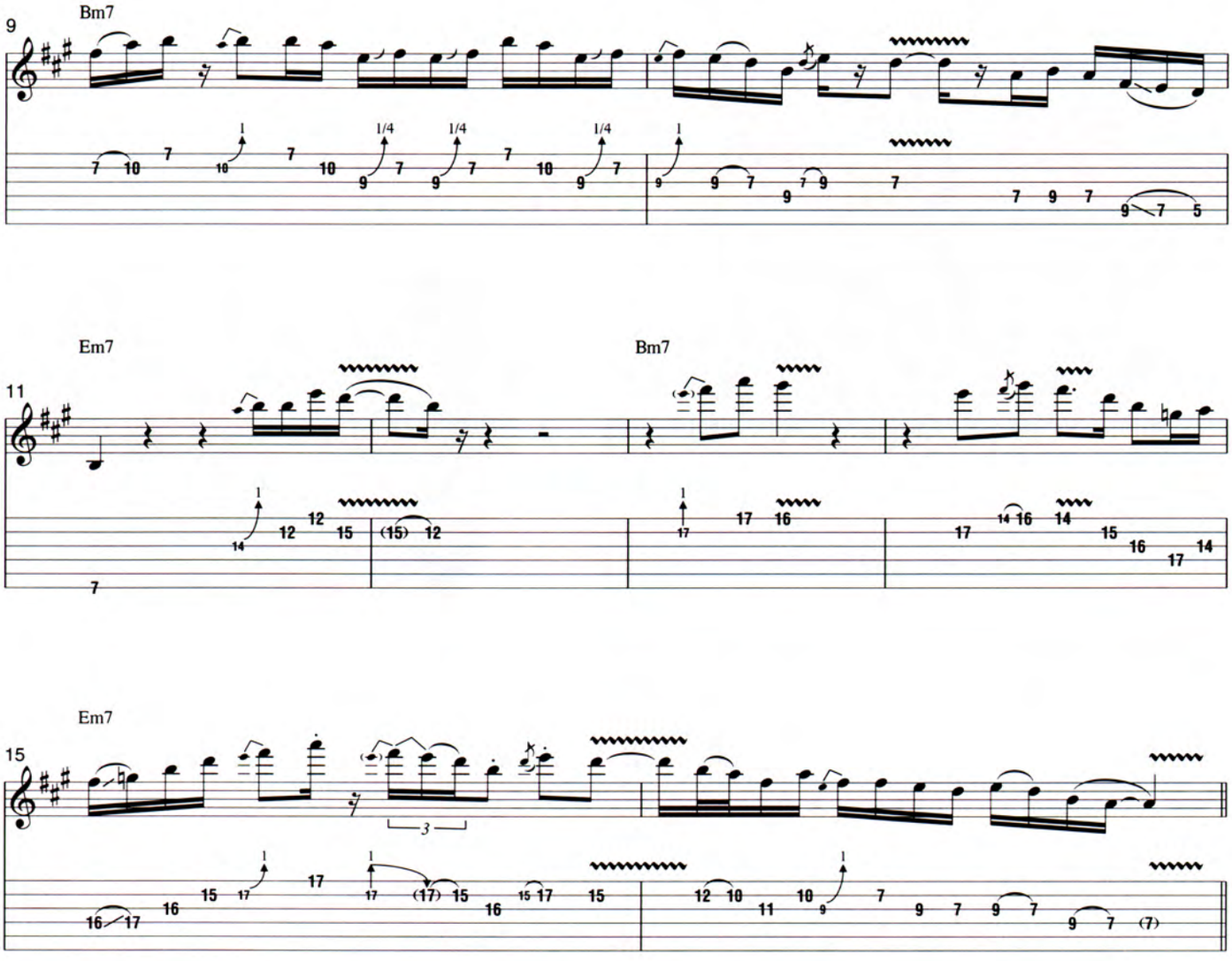

9
Bm7
1/4
1/4
1/4
11
Em7
Bm7
15
Em7
3

INTEGRAL TECHNIQUES

Much more than the gear we use (guitars, amps, etc.), our tone lies mostly in the way we play the instrument—that is, our *technique*. This is why you can play through the exact same rig as your favorite player—down to the string gauge and pick thickness—and still not really sound like them. By the same token, it's also the reason that our favorite players tend to be recognizable, regardless of the rig through which they're playing. In this chapter, we'll look closely at Robben's technique and examine the crucial aspects of it that help shape his tone.

Playing with the Blunt Side of the Pick

Many times, Robben will actually hold the pick so that a rounded portion, as opposed to the pointed end, is plucking the strings. In other words, instead of holding the pick like this (see photo L):

He'll hold it like this (see photo M):

Though relatively subtle, this technique can make quite a difference in the sound of a lick. To demonstrate, listen to the audio to hear the same phrase played twice: first, with the pick held the normal way, and then with the pick held the way Robben often does.

Techniques Example 1

This technique especially comes in handy when sustaining chords with the tremolo technique, as Robben will often do. It's much easier to get a smooth, consistent tremolo strum when using the blunt end. Try it and hear for yourself!

"The Claw"

Robben is sometimes referred to by this nickname, "the Claw," which describes his fret-hand technique—particularly his ring and pinky fingers. If you watch him play, you'll see that these two fingers are often locked together, as if fused into one single unit—not terribly different than Django Reinhardt's fingers after his burn incident.

The big difference, of course, is that Robben can—and does—make separate use of them all the time. But a good portion of the time, especially in typical blues box licks, Robben actually frets notes with his pinky finger (reinforced by the ring) that other players would fret with their ring finger. In fact, Robben will sometimes even add his middle finger to "the claw," adding even more weight and support to the fretting finger. So, if you're having trouble imitating Robben's sound on a certain lick, try to perform it with this technique and see if it gets you closer to his sound.

Hybrid or Fingerstyle Picking

Robben also makes extensive use of his fingers when plucking the strings. This is occasionally done in a hybrid style, whereby he holds the pick between his thumb and index but also uses the middle and/or ring fingers to pluck (see photo N). However, more often he'll slide the pick between his index and middle fingers (see photo O) and just use his bare fingers to pluck.

He most often makes use of finger-plucking when playing with a clean tone, though that's not a steadfast rule. When playing with the fingers, he can make certain notes really pop by pulling up on the string and allowing it to snap back against the fretboard. Check out the audio to hear the same lick played twice: first with the pick, and then with the fingers.

N

O

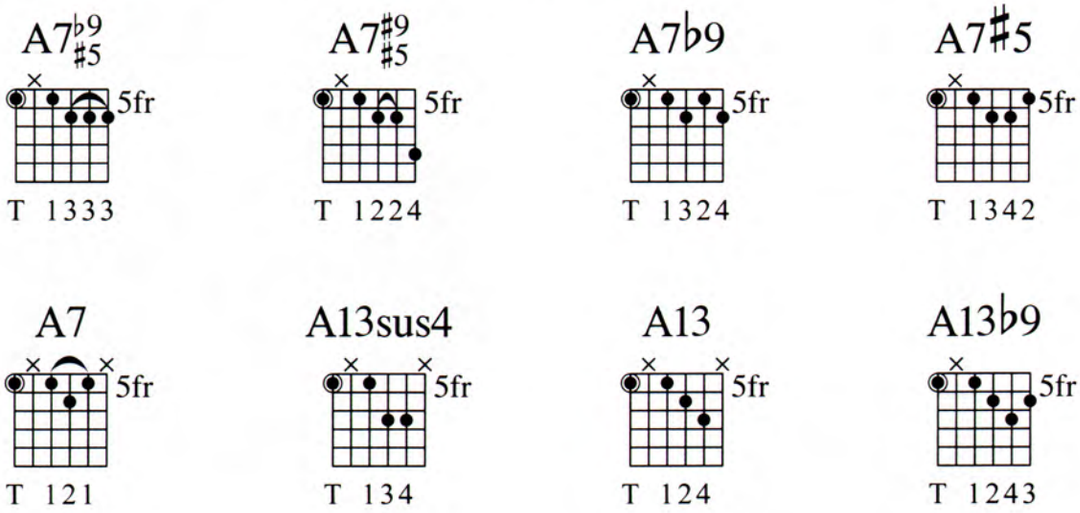
Techniques Example 2

Listen to "Life Song (One for Annie)" to hear Robben's fingerstyle approach.

Thumb Fretting

Though it's not as integral to his style as it was to Jimi Hendrix or Stevie Ray, Robben is a big proponent of thumb fretting, and he makes use of it a good deal, especially when playing in more of an R&B style. Robben's use is almost exclusively limited to rhythm guitar, however, unlike Jimi or Stevie (or Eric Johnson, for instance), who would occasionally include the thumb as a low-note jab during lead work, as well.

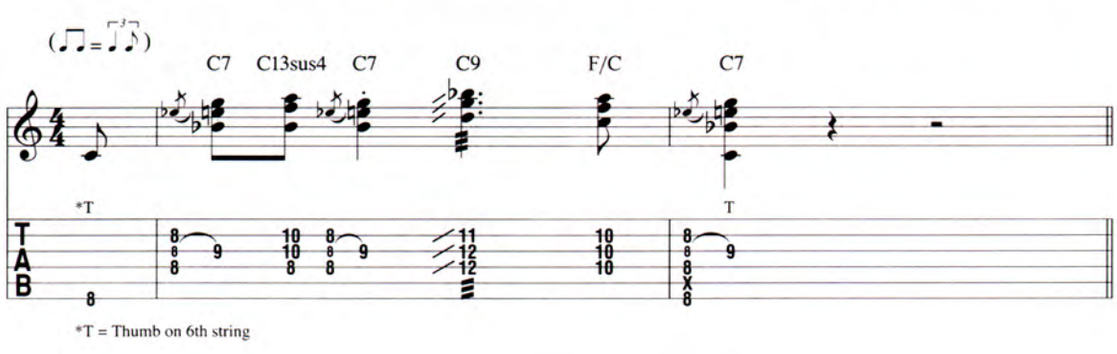
Below are several voicings in which Robben would most certainly use the thumb on the sixth string. These are presented in the key of A, but the same approach applies to any key.



Tremolo Picking

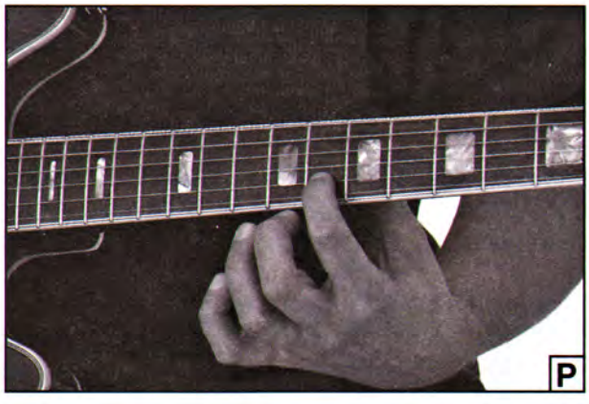
Robben has a very nice tremolo-picking technique and often applies it to chords to kind of mimic the sustain of an organ. As mentioned earlier, using the blunt side of the pick greatly aids this technique. If you haven't tried it before, be sure to give it a shot. The rounded edge of the pick simply glides through the strings with less effort, making tremolo picking of chords much, much easier. Here's an example of how he might use this technique:

Techniques Example 3

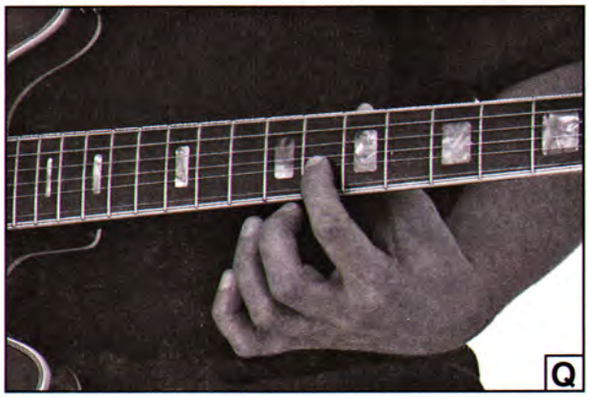


You'll hear him do this quite a bit when he's playing unaccompanied—for instance, in a clinic setting.

Vibrato



Robben's got a very nice, smooth vibrato that rarely sounds excessive or out of place. It's definitely on the subtler side, as compared to someone like Jimi Hendrix or Stevie Ray Vaughan. Technically speaking, he usually opts for more of a forearm vibrato, similar to Eric Clapton, instead of the wrist motion favored by Jimi and Stevie. On string 2, for example (see photo P), he'll keep his wrist fairly straight and bend the string slightly upward with the forearm (see photo Q) and release it over and over to generate the vibrato.



When playing on the low E string, where it's not possible to push the string upward toward the ceiling, he'll bend it down slightly to generate the vibrato, mostly using the biggest finger joint (see photos R and S).

Be sure to listen to some original recordings and watch some live footage to hear and see how this works in action. "Revelation" has plenty of great vibrato to hear.

Palm Muting

Whereas many people think of hard rock or metal rhythm guitar when they hear the term "palm muting," it actually can be used in many other contexts, and Robben's playing is a perfect example. He'll often incorporate palm muting into a lick to create dynamics and accents within a phrase. For example, he may climb up a few palm-muted pickup notes and then release the mute for a higher, targeted note, which will help make that note speak a bit more. This mixture of swallowed (muted) and accented (unmuted) notes helps his playing breathe and flow. Here's an example to demonstrate this effect:

Techniques Example 4

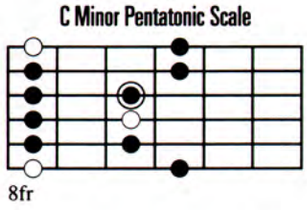
This is often a subtle thing, but you'd certainly miss it if it weren't there. Check out "The Brother" to hear this idea in action.

STYLISTIC DNA

Here, we'll dig into some of Robben's habits as a player that tend to show up repeatedly in his playing one way or another. These are a bit harder to define than concrete techniques, but, when it comes to creating his sonic signature, they're just as essential. These concepts transcend mere technique and reside deep inside Robben's musical heart. In other words, these concepts would most likely still be evident in his playing if you gave him only an acoustic guitar.

The Descending Grace-Note Slide

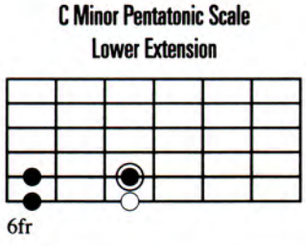
This is something that's so prevalent in Robben's playing that it's hard to sound like him without it. The idea is to approach a note with a quick, descending slide of either a half step or a whole step. This is also used almost all the time on the same note of the scale—the 4th—and it's nearly always followed by the ♭3rd. In other words, if we were playing a C minor pentatonic scale, we'd likely hear this technique being applied to the F note on string 3, fret 10:



Here's a typical lick from this form to demonstrate, using a half-step slide.

DNA Example 1

The lower F in this position would also be treated to this effect as well, but it would be done so within the lower-extension box shape:



Here's how that would sound, this time using a whole-step slide.

DNA Example 2

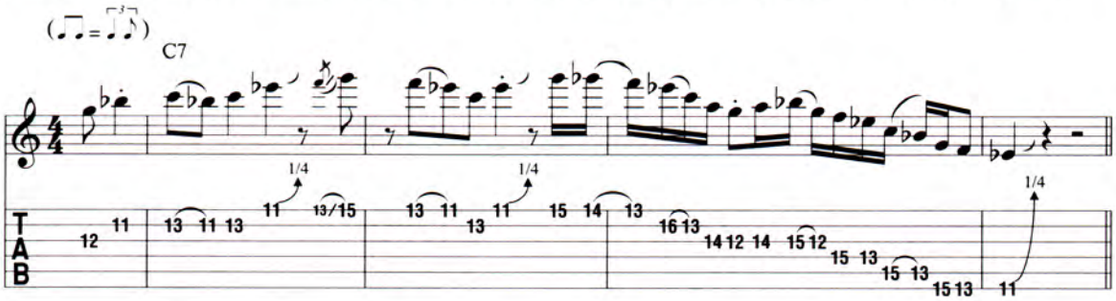
Of course, Robben makes use of ascending slides in the same way, usually up to the 5th of the key, but many other players do that as well. It's much less common to hear the reverse.

Double-Timing

The term *double-timing* refers to playing notes twice as fast as the basic rhythmic unit of the song. If you have a typical 12-bar blues shuffle, for example, then double-timing would mean playing a 16th-note-based line on top of it. This is common practice in jazz, but it's not as much so in blues. Though many players will often play triplets over a shuffle, it's not terribly common to hear someone shift fully into 16th notes, as Robben will do on occasion. This is most likely due to his background in jazz, where he no doubt heard it done time and again by the greats.

Below is an example that takes place over a shuffle groove in C. Notice that it doesn't have to consist of straight, uninterrupted 16th notes; it's just a mindset of thinking that the tempo has doubled for a period of time.

DNA Example 3



Check out "Revelation" to hear plenty of awesome double-timing.

Cramming

With regards to soloing, *cramming* refers to squeezing a whole bunch of notes into a designated area, whatever it takes. It's a fairly common occurrence with many players in slow blues (check out Stevie Ray's take on "Leave My Girl Alone" to hear this), but Robben will use it in more moderate tempo tunes as well. Check out measures 131–132 of the outro in "The Brother" to hear an excellent example of this. Cramming creates a great bit of tension and can really help set up or cap off a climactic moment.

Below is an example of how this may sound in a moderate blues shuffle in G. We're working from the G blues scale here.

DNA Example 4

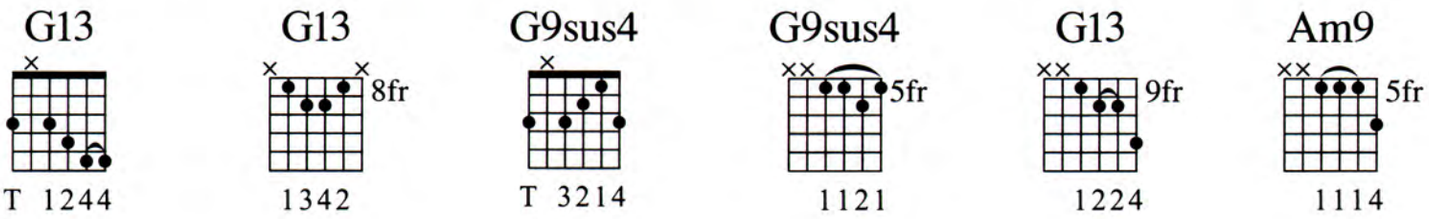
Again, listen to "Revelation" for some nice cramming, as well as "I Ain't Got Nothin' but the Blues."

Extensions and Alterations

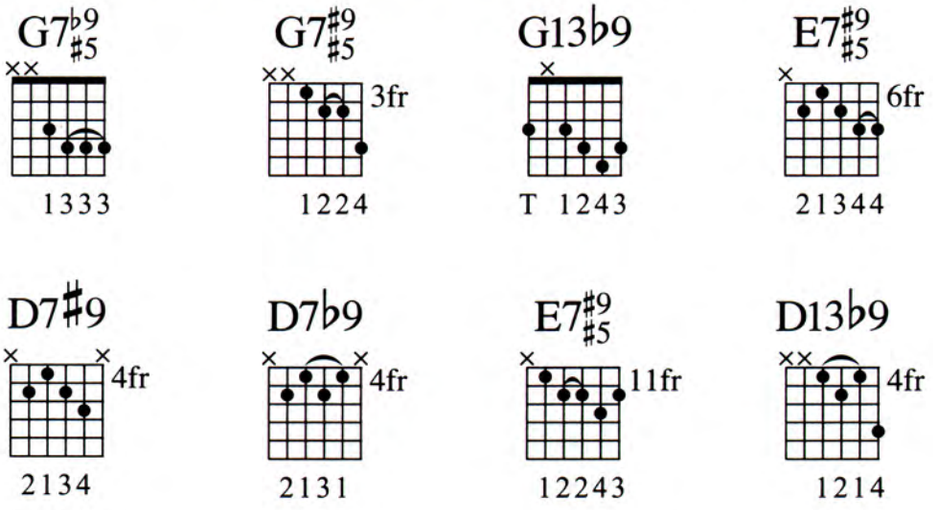
This topic is definitely a product of Robben's jazz background. *Extensions* refer to notes that arise from the process of continuing to stack notes in 3rds above the standard seventh chord. For example, if you take a C major scale, begin with C, and start stacking 3rds (i.e., every other note), you'll get a series of different chords, beginning with a triad, a seventh chord, and continuing on from there.

(**Note:** When the major 7th is present, the 11th is usually sharped to avoid conflict with it.)

The same process can be done with minor or dominant chords as well, yielding chords such as minor 9ths, minor 13ths, dominant 9ths, dominant 11ths, etc. Robben often makes use of this concept, both in his rhythm playing and his soloing. For example, it's not unusual to see these types of voicings while he's comping rhythm in a G blues.

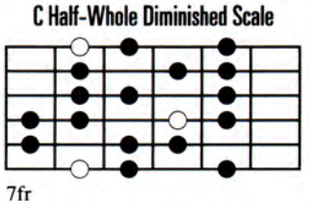


These extensions can be altered (sharped or flatted) as well, creating *altered chords* such as these:



When soloing, Robben will often accent these extensions in the upper registers of his lines for a more colorful sound. Here's an example of that using a lick in C, where the C7 (I) chord is moving to an F7 (IV).

When soloing over altered dominant chords, particularly those with an altered 9th and natural 13th, Robben often makes use of the *half-whole diminished scale*, which is an eight-note scale that alternates half steps and whole steps. Here's a fingering for C half-whole diminished in proximity of eighth position:



And here's a lick in a similar vein to the last one, although it has been altered to make use of the C half-whole diminished scale:

DNA Example 6

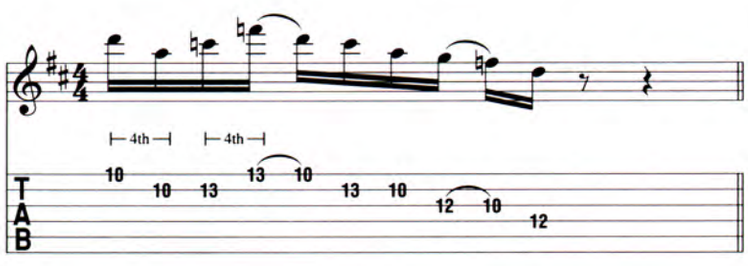
Robben uses these altered sounds rather sparingly, so when they do show up, they can really turn a head.

Angular Phrasing

Robben's phrases often have an angular quality that sets them apart from the everyday bluesman—another vestige likely from his days spent playing jazz and fusion. "Angular" refers to unexpected leaps, changes of direction, or large intervals in general.

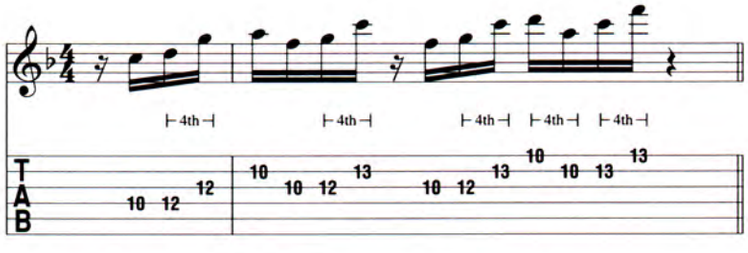
This can be something as simple as exploiting the 4ths that are present within the typical minor pentatonic box. For example, here's a double-time line that Robben might play out of the 10th-position D minor pentatonic box:

DNA Example 7



Or perhaps something like this:

DNA Example 8

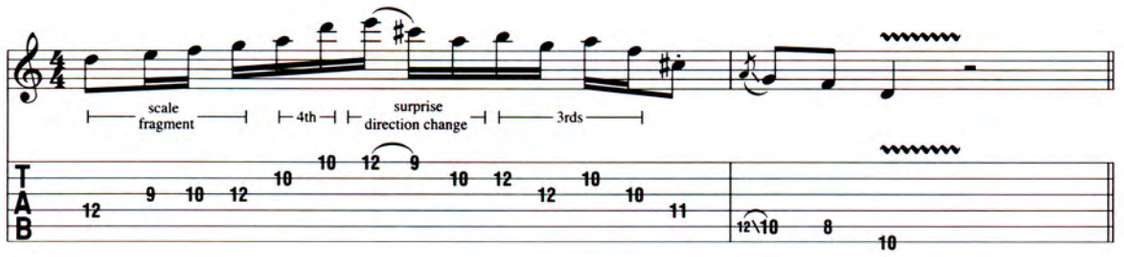


In many of his more angular lines, he seems to blend several traits, including:

- Short scale fragments
- Larger leaps
- Surprising directional changes
- 3rds sequences

This next example demonstrates the above with a D melodic minor lick. Melodic minor is another favorite scale of Robben's, particularly when playing over a ii–V progression. In these situations, he'll often play the melodic minor based off the ii chord.

DNA
Example 9



The next time you find yourself running up or down the same ol' pentatonic lick, take a tip from Robben and try implementing some of these strategies to see if you can freshen things up a bit.

MUST HEAR

Robben has covered a lot of stylistic ground throughout his career, and the common thread running through all of it is stellar guitar playing. Below is a list of some essential listening that no Robben Ford fan should miss.

Audio Recordings

The Charles Ford Band, 1972

Essential Tracks

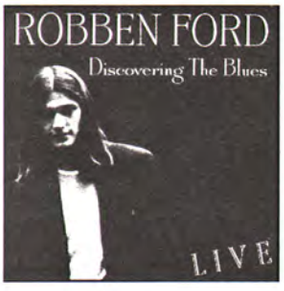
Blue and Lonesome

Live: Jimmy Witherspoon & Robben Ford, 1976

Essential Tracks

All

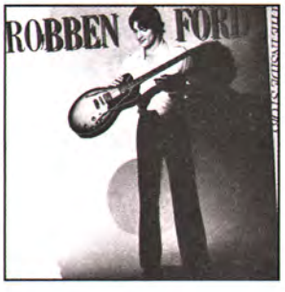
Discovering the Blues, 1978



Essential Tracks

Sweet Sixteen
It's My Own Fault
Blue and Lonesome

The Inside Story, 1979



Essential Tracks

The Inside Story
Tee Time for Eric

Talk to Your Daughter, 1988

Essential Tracks

Mama Talk to Your Daughter
Help the Poor
I Ain't Got Nothin' but the Blues
Born Under a Bad Sign
Revelation

Robben Ford & the Blue Line, 1992

Essential Tracks

The Brother (For Jimmie and Stevie)
You Cut Me to the Bone
My Love Will Never Die
Prison of Love
Start It Up
Life Song (One for Annie)

Mystic Mile, 1993

Essential Tracks

He Don't Play Nothin' but the Blues
Busted Up
Worried Life Blues
Misdirected Life Blues

Handful of Blues, 1995

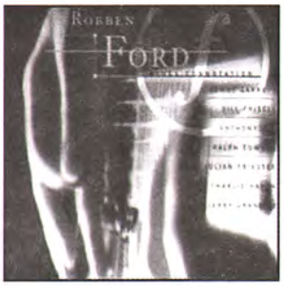
Essential Tracks

Rugged Road
The Miller's Son

Blues Connotation, 1996

Essential Tracks

City Life
Billie's Bounce (Bill's Bounce)



Tiger Walk, 1997

Essential Tracks

Red Lady With Cello
The Champ

Supernatural, 1999

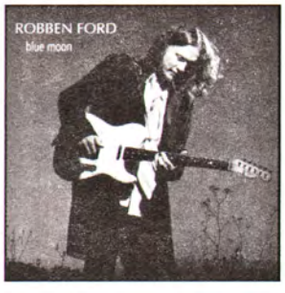
Essential Tracks

Supernatural
Nothing to Nobody

Blue Moon, 2002

Essential Tracks

Indianola
Something for the Pain



Larry Carlton/Robben Ford: Live in Tokyo, 2007

Essential Tracks

That Road
Burnable

MUST SEE

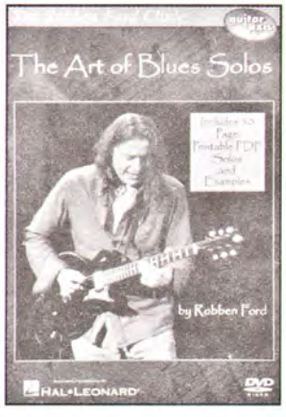
Along with being a world-class guitarist throughout most of his career, Robben's also a famous educator, with a slew of video educational products and a busy clinic schedule. Seeing this stuff come from the horse's mouth (or hands, as it were) can instantly clear up a myriad of questions, and you'd no doubt benefit greatly from studying these.

On DVD or VHS

The Art of Blues Rhythm, Guitar Axis

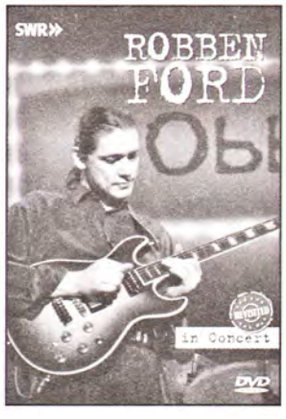
The Art of Blues Solos, Guitar Axis

These two companion DVDs basically give you front-seat tickets to one of his clinics, in which he discusses in-depth his approach to both rhythm and lead playing.



In Concert: Revisited, MVD Entertainment

This DVD covers his second live appearance on the German TV show "Ohne Filter" and features spectacular playing by Robben all around.



On YouTube

There is plenty of great live footage of Robben available on YouTube, and there's also a ton of instructional material.

Robben Ford & the Blue Line

This search will pull up an excellent video of the band's performance shortly after the release of the album. The sound and video are decent quality.

Miles Davis (with Robben Ford)

This search will reveal a live show of Robben playing "New Blues" and "Maze" with Miles. Miles is… well, Miles, but Robben really burns on a Strat here.

Robben Ford Blonde 1960 Telecaster

This is a nice three-minute video in which Robben discusses his famous blonde Tele.

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